

Monstrous Mothers:
The Womb as Grammar in the Francophone black Atlantic

by

Nasanin Rosado DeRodes

Department of Romance Studies
Duke University

Defense Date: March 31, 2025

Approved:

Annette Joseph-Gabriel, Advisor

Felwine Sarr, Advisor

Walter Mignolo

Jennifer Nash

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Romance Studies in The Graduate
School of
Duke University
2025

ABSTRACT
Monstrous Mothers:
The Womb as Grammar in the black Atlantic

by

Nasanin Rosado DeRodes

Department of Romance Studies
Duke University

Defense Date: March 31, 2025

Approved:

Annette Joseph-Gabriel, Advior

Felwine Sarr, Advisor

Walter Mignolo

Jennifer Nash

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Romance Studies in
The Graduate School of
Duke University
2025

Copyright by
Nasanin Rosado DeRodes
2025

Abstract

This dissertation examines how the womb functions as a structuring grammar in black Atlantic thought, not merely as a biological site of reproduction but as a conceptual mechanism through which blackness is produced, constrained, and resisted. Across Black Atlantic literature and theory, the womb has been figured as both a site of ontological negation—where blackness is inscribed through captivity, forced reproduction, and racialized dispossession—and a site of radical disruption, where black women refuse the logics of enslavement and biological determinism. The problem at the heart of this project is the tension between the womb’s metaphorization and its materiality. While theorists like Édouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, Christina Sharpe, and Saidiya Hartman invoke the womb to describe the hold of the ship, the plantation, and the prison as sites of violent (re)birth, this abstraction risks erasing the lived realities of black women’s reproductive labor, maternal fugitivity, and refusal. This dissertation interrogates the stakes of this metaphorization while also examining how black women writers reclaim and disrupt the imposed grammar of the womb, refusing its reduction to a vessel of suffering.

To engage this problem, the dissertation employs an interdisciplinary methodology, drawing from Black feminist thought, literary analysis, and

historical inquiry. The primary texts include theoretical works from Hortense Spillers, Fred Moten, Sylvia Wynter, Aimé Césaire, Fabienne Kanor, and Achille Mbembe alongside historiographical literary texts from Marie-Célie Agnant, Maryse Condé, Edwidge Danticat, Évelyne Trouillot, Fabienne Kanor, and Simone Schwarz-Bart which foreground black maternal presence and reproductive agency. Through close readings, I trace how the womb is rendered across these texts—how it is theorized as a space of extraction and control, but also as a locus of memory, resistance, and alternative forms of kinship. In analyzing both the metaphorical and material dimensions of the womb, I consider how the figure of the black mother has been simultaneously erased, commodified, and reclaimed within the epistemologies of the Black Atlantic.

This dissertation ultimately argues that the womb operates not just as a metaphor but as a grammar—a structuring force that dictates how blackness is imagined, categorized, and lived. Black women’s literary and theoretical interventions unsettle this grammar, refusing the imposed meanings that tether their bodies to histories of racial capitalism and reproductive control. By pushing against the womb’s metaphorization while refusing its pure material reduction, this project illuminates how black maternal figures in literature and theory enact an ongoing, insurgent grammar—one that both haunts and rewrites the terms of black being, relation, and futurity.

Dedication

For my mother,

and her mother before her,

and her mother before her,

and..

Contents

Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	v
1. excavating the womb: an introduction	1
monstrous mothers	3
womb-as-grammar.....	15
chapters.....	20
1.5 womb-as-metaphor	27
2. haunting the womb	50
haunting history	54
spooking the spectral.....	69
towards a black atlantic hauntology	86
3. weaponizing the womb	98
representing and resisting abjection.....	101
infanticide and necropolitics	118
a politics of revolt and care.....	138
4. unsettling the womb.....	158
unsettling the stomach and the episteme	162
monstrous maternity	170
killing kinship.....	191
5. conclusion	216
References	221

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by acknowledging that I am writing this dissertation in Durham, North Carolina, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Shakori, Eno and Tuscarora people, who have stewarded this land throughout the generations. What is now Durham was originally the territory of several Native nations, including Tutelo (TOO-tee-lo)- and Saponi (suh-POE-nee)-speaking peoples. Many of their communities were displaced or killed through war, disease, and colonial expansion. Today, the Triangle is surrounded by contemporary Native nations, the descendants of Tutelo, Saponi, and other Indigenous peoples who survived early colonization. These nations include the Haliwa-Saponi (HALL-i-wa suh-POE-nee), Sappony (suh-POE-nee), and Occaneechi (oh-kuh-NEE-chee) Band of Saponi. North Carolina's Research Triangle is also home to a thriving urban Native American community who represent Native nations from across the United States. Together, these Indigenous nations and communities contribute to North Carolina's ranking as the state with the largest Native American population east of Oklahoma¹.

¹ Land Acknowledgement generously provided to Duke's Nicholas School of the Environment by Drs. Ryan Emanuel and Malinda Lowery of the Lumbee tribe, to use until Duke University completes the process of working with tribe members statewide to come to agreement on a Duke-wide land acknowledgement.

"... we are loving, languaging animals. That is, we belong to an evolutionary history in which the biology of love has been a central feature of the manner of living that defined our lineage. Yet, we see the other and care for [them] only to the extent that we have lived in the biology of love and intimacy, and have cultivated seeing and caring for the other as part of our living as caring human beings with other human beings.

— *The Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love*

Around the year 1940 in Kermanshah, Iran, my great-grandmother Efat was in high school, studying French language and literature, when she was expelled for proudly identifying as a member of the Bahá'í Faith. Despite the persecution she, and her family, experienced as Bahá'ís in a predominantly Muslim country, her faith was a flame that never faltered, that she shared with her children and grandchildren, and she was a pillar of the Faith until the end of her time with us. In 1979, she made it here on the last plane that left Tehran for America before the now infamous events of the Islamic Revolution. Due in no small part to her courage and steadfastness, I have had the privilege of both openly practicing our Faith and pursuing my studies in French—a happy coincidence that I didn't discover, unfortunately, until after she passed. Call it kismet, call it fate, but since that discovery, all my work has and will continue to be in her honor.

I come from a coven of curly-haired, witchy women, my own cult of mothers and daughters, who wrote the biology of love and intimacy into our genetic code generations ago. Ours is a world of lipstick smudges, coffee grounds,

and leather spines—an inherited praxis of strength, support, and sacrifice. Efat, Nouranieh, Nilufar, Negar, Neda, Mina, Leila, Kiyan. I learned to love from you, and so my love for you is an endless, ageless swell, a thing with teeth. My grandmother, Nouranieh, taught me everything worth knowing, especially *paciencia y fe*. My mother, my auburn Medusa, Nilufar, you taught me how to be free. Negar and Neda, you are my right and left hands, the twin pillars who hold me up (and who gave me my favorite people in this universe and every other). Mina, Leila, Kiyan... دردندان توي سرم, everything I do, I do for you. These precious gifts have made everything that follows possible.

My chosen family is no less fierce and no less beloved. Seth, Sydney, Ashley, Evan, and Samar, you showed me what it is to love and support someone without limits. You opened my eyes to a new practice of kinship that changed the trajectory of my life (and research) forever. For the late nights, the peer-editing, the laughs even in the darkest of times, and the unwavering belief that I could and should do this work, I owe you everything.

Papi, a través del tiempo y del espacio, siempre puedo sentir nuestra conexión psico-telepática. Jona, Jay, Martha, Camron, Bijan, Shahla, Mana, Jasmine, Isabelle, Yesi, Lincoln... forgive me, there are too many of you to name here, but to have a Persian, Puerto Rican family is a privilege I do not take lightly. It's a line that always running. To my in-laws, Bob and Berni, thank you for welcoming me into

your family with open arms. My intellectual trajectory has taken me far from my home and family in Atlanta, GA, but I am among the lucky few who met their people in high school and held on tight—Justin, Jeffrey, Nick, Emily, Jake, Trevor, Kate, Broughton, Karthik and Duner... they wouldn't last an hour in the asylum where they made us. Along with Reagan, Kevin, and Kristina, if Atlanta is still the home of my heart, it is due in no small part to knowing that your hugs and presences await me. Andrew, you teach me over and over again that true friendship can survive any distance, in time or space.

At New York University, I started my academic journey and took off running, in no small part due to the people by my side and the professors who believed in my potential (and made me believe in it too). Catherine, Dean, Claire, and Anne, you have brought nothing but joy, support, and light to my life; I am so, so grateful for your steadfast friendship even as our paths have diverged. Several states away, at Duke University, home- and heart-sick, I forged new relationships that strengthened my spirit throughout the long road of a Ph.D. *Piti piti zwazo fe cich li*. Theodore, I knew our souls were made of the same stuff at first sight, and I would give up New York for you in every lifetime. Francesca, Brian, Isabel, and Laura, I treasure you and our memories together.

At NYU, Doctors Ludovic Cortade, Marie Cruz-Soto, Mark Sanders, Stéphane Gerson, and Kaoutar Harchi taught me new languages and literatures

while constantly challenging my own research and writing. *Je leur suis énormément reconnaissante d'avoir nourri ma curiosité intellectuelle et d'avoir encouragé ma perspective intellectuelle naissante.* I would not currently be at Duke University without the encouragement of Doctors Deborah Jenson and Laurent DuBois, who convinced me that a New Yorker could thrive in North Carolina and whose works were guiding lights for me as I trekked along my intellectual trajectory. I especially want to thank Doctors DuBois and Jenson, as well as Dr. Erika Serrato of UNC, for introducing me to Emma, Tituba, and Sophie, who have been my steadfast companions over the last six years. My research and writing are undeniably indebted to the scholarship and support of my committee members, with whom I have been honored to collaborate, work, and dialogue: Doctors Annette Joseph Gabriel, Felwine Sarr, Walter Mignolo, and Jennifer Nash. I would not be the scholar I am today without the example and standard they set for intellectual rigor and embodied agency, in- and out-side of academia.

One day, reading Omike'eke Natasha Tinsley's work *Ezili's Mirrors*, I was struck by this sentence: "Vodou epistemology understands that one plus one equals (not two, but) three" (23). Imagine my surprise, finding out that you taught me my most personal lesson in Vodou epistemology. As I told you on our wedding day, "I'm no mathematician, but I've found with you that the sum is more than its parts, that one and one is greater than two." My best friend, my

husband, you are my solace and salvation. This accomplishment is as much as yours as it is mine; it would not have been possible without your patience, fortitude, support, and love. Ours is a world of laughter and love, of play and passion, for which I am endlessly grateful. To wake up beside you every day, to do this thing called life hand-in-hand with you, these are my greatest privileges and joys in this life. I'll see you tomorrow.

1. excavating the womb: an introduction

"You see, we were worth a lot. All that was in my thesis. It took a lot of black women's sweat to fertilise the sugar cane, the cotton, the tobacco; it took a black woman's womb to carry the hands that would cut the cane and harvest the cotton; a black woman's vagina to drown the rage and violence of all the brutes, black or white. But today, the wood in this table is worth more than ten black women, isn't that the truth, Little Doctor? No one is interested in black women. That's why they are better off dead. That's why many of them are born already dead; right! Do you understand, Dollie?"¹
— Marie Célie Agnant, *Le Livre d'Emma*

The womb haunts the black Atlantic—not simply as an organ of reproduction but as a site of historical, ontological, and epistemological rupture. Across literature, theory, and cultural memory, it is an engine of transformation, a vessel of erasure, and a cipher for both birth and negation. The womb, in the following texts, does not merely bring forth life; it remakes it under conditions of duress, coercion, and commodification. The hold of the slave ship, the ocean's depths, the prison cell—each has been imagined as a womb in black Atlantic

¹ "Vous voyez, nous rapportions gros. Tout cela, c'était dans ma thèse. Il fallait, je vous dis, de la bonne sueur de Nègresse pour féconder la canne, le coton, le tabac ; son ventre, pour porter les bras qui servaient à couper cette canne et récolter le coton; son sexe pour noyer la rage et la violence de toutes les brutes, Nègres ou Blancs. Mais aujourd'hui, le bois de cette table a plus de valeur que dix Nègresses, n'est-ce pas la vérité, petit docteur ? Elles ne suscitent aucun intérêt, les Nègresses. C'est pour cela qu'elles sont mieux mortes. C'est pour cela que beaucoup d'entre elles naissent déjà mortes, voilà! Tu comprends, Poupette ?" (*Le Livre d'Emma* 27-28)

thought, a space where bodies are unmade and remade, where subjectivity is simultaneously produced and foreclosed. Many black Atlantic theorists have, in different ways, engaged with this paradox, revealing how the womb-as-metaphor operates as both a narrative strategy and a conceptual grammar, a means of articulating the afterlives of slavery through the logics of gestation and un-birth. To invoke the womb in this archive is to confront the history of black reproduction not only as a site of autonomy or kinship but also as a space of violent inscription, of forced labor, of political and economic calculus. It is to acknowledge that the womb, here, does not belong to the mother but to the world-making structures of racial capitalism and chattel slavery.

Yet, this is not simply a story of domination. If the slave ship's hold, the plantation, and the prison have been cast as wombs of black suffering, they have also been sites of rebellion, refusal, and world-building. The womb, as a conceptual force, also troubles the very logics that seek to fix it in place. Black women writers and historians have long resisted its abstraction into mere metaphor, insisting on the material realities of birth, abortion, and reproductive autonomy in the afterlives of slavery. Through haunting, rupture, and violence, these texts reframe the womb not just as a space of coerced reproduction but as an insurgent locus of possibility, of transformation on its own terms. The following dissertation traces this hybrid movement—the womb as a means of

abjection and as a radical site of agency, the space where blackness is violently produced and where it resists its (re)production, where the logics of the hold and the plantation are both written and unwritten. It is here, in the tensions between metaphor and flesh, between negation and generation, that the womb emerges as one of the most charged and contested spaces in the black Atlantic archive.

monstrous mothers

This dissertation examines the womb as a structuring grammar in black Atlantic literature and theory, revealing how it operates as both a site of racial inscription and a paradoxical space of resistance. While the womb has historically been used as a conceptual tool to theorize the violence of the slave episteme—from the hold of the ship to the carceral logics of the modern prison—black women writers disrupt this imposed grammar, reclaiming maternal fugitivity, reproductive refusal, and hauntological modes of being. By tracing the strategies employed by black Atlantic writers both to disrupt the blood- and biologies of the slave episteme and to imagine alternatives, this dissertation interrogates both the risks and possibilities embedded in the womb's continued invocation, ultimately arguing that the black maternal body cannot be reduced to either pure negation or pure reproduction but remains a site of tension, transformation, and radical potential.

In this dissertation, I pay attention and homage to the womb as its own grammar in the archive of the black Atlantic, mobilizing Hortense Spiller's much-cited reading of "female flesh 'engendered'... [as] a praxis and a theory" (68). This work thus pays particular attention to the assemblage created through the various abstractions of the womb in the episteme of racial biocapitalism as well as its embodied representations in black Atlantic literature. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers proposes that "[it] is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within" (80). I am proposing a revision of this statement with a different grammar: that it is perhaps the heritage of the *womb*, as both metaphor and matter, that descendants of the trade in the diaspora must regain. In this work, Hortense Spillers outlines the need for special attention to the "American Grammar" and the process by which such work can be done:

"The problem before us is deceptively simple: the terms [Peaches, Brown Sugar, Sapphire, Earth Mother, Aunty, etc] isolate overdetermined nominative properties. *Embedded in bizarre axiological ground, they demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding: they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents to buried underneath them to come clean...* In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time,

over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness."² (65)

Therefore, I propose to undertake a methodology of excavation: exhuming the "layers of... meaning" burying the term "womb" in a black Atlantic grammar (65). Spillers, however, directs us to pay attention not only to these layers of meaning but also the value system constructed by these stratified layers. In the theory and the literature of the black Atlantic, the "womb" is often abstracted from its pluralities and material realities, from the flesh, serving instead as a metaphor for passage, as syntactical shorthand for the extractive logics of racial biocapitalism (of which it is perhaps the epitome), and as an allegory for natal alienation—creating a semantic minefield of (re)production and labor in the black Atlantic archive that runs the risk of evacuating the black maternal the womb, fragmenting the body.

Thus, the womb does not merely signify; it structures. Within black Atlantic thought, it does not function solely as a metaphor for birth, transition, or transformation—it is a grammar, a syntactical force through which the world is organized, meanings are made, and subjects are produced. To speak of the womb in this context is not simply to invoke gestation or maternity but to engage a

² Emphasis my own.

larger epistemological architecture, one in which blackness is made, unmade, and remade through reproductive violence and economic extraction. If the womb (a "being maternal") is, as Moten suggests, "indistinguishable from a being material," then it follows that its function extends beyond biological reproduction into a broader field of relation, where labor, language, and ontology itself are inscribed through its logic (16). The womb, then, is not just a concept in the black Atlantic archive—it is the very mechanism through which meaning coheres and fractures.

Theoretical engagements with the womb have historically oscillated between its material and metaphysical registers, between the lived experiences of black maternity and its abstraction into a vessel of historical trauma. In *Poétique de la relation*, poet-philosopher Édouard Glissant casts the slave ship's hold as a "womb-abyss," a paradoxical space of dissolution and rebirth, where the enslaved are expelled into the nonworld of social death (28). The ship does not birth in any conventional sense—it un-births, it negates, it transforms bodies into property, subjects into commodities. And yet, even as the womb-abyss annihilates, it produces something else: a mode of relation forged in the crucible of forced displacement and unimaginable loss. This is the violent dialectic that structures black maternity in the afterlives of slavery: the simultaneous

extraction of life (and life-making capacity) and the remaking of meaning through that loss.

Scholar and sage Christina Sharpe extends this logic in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, where she theorizes the hold of the ship, the hold of the prison, and the hold of the womb as interconnected spaces of racialized abjection. Sharpe's formulation—"the hold is the slave ship hold; is the hold of the so-called migrant ship; is the prison; is the womb that produces blackness"—captures the cyclical reproduction of black precarity, where blackness is produced not simply as identity but as condition, as state of un-belonging, as a subjectivity continually forged in the aftermath of captivity (27). What does it mean for the womb to be positioned within this series of equivalences? Under the terms of Sharpe's critique, the womb does not birth blackness so much as it birthmarks it, scripting it into a genealogy of dispossession, a sequence of imposed legibilities. To be born black, under these conditions, is to emerge into a grammar already written—a structure where one's being is determined not by self-possession but by the logics of captivity that are preconditioned by birth itself.

And yet, if the womb functions as a site of ontological negation in black Atlantic thought, as a result it is also a space of radical refusal. Black women writers, including but not limited to Marie-Célie Agnant, Maryse Condé,

Edwidge Danticat, Fabienne Kanor, Simone Schwarz-Bart, and Évelyne Trouillot, have long resisted the metaphorization of black maternal bodies, pushing against the abstraction of the maternal into a symbolic placeholder for suffering, survival, or sacrificial labor. Saidiya Hartman warns against the excessive metaphorization of black women's reproductive labor, reminding us that the work of the womb in slavery was not simply conceptual—it was violently, materially real. "If we intend to do more than make the recalcitrant domestic, the outcast, and insurrectionist a figure for our revolutionary longing," she writes, "then we must never lose sight of the material conditions of her existence or how much she has been required to give for our survival" ("The Belly of the World" 171). To insist on the materiality of the womb in this context is to refuse its reduction to pure symbolism, to name the forced reproductive labor of enslaved women as precisely that—labor, exploitation, the foundation upon which entire economies were built. It is also to acknowledge the strategies of resistance embedded within that labor, from clandestine acts of abortion to maternal fugitivity, refusals to reproduce the system that seeks to consume them.

Thus, the black Atlantic womb is a conceptual framework that organizes meaning while simultaneously destabilizing it. It is a vessel of negation and a mutinous site of possibility, the space through which racial capitalism inscribes its logics and the space through which black women theorists and writers

unwrite them. It is grammar, in the sense that it dictates relation, and it is also un-grammar, an interruption, a breaking of the terms through which black life is constrained. This is the tension that animates this work: how the womb structures black Atlantic epistemology, how black women's writing intervenes in that structure, and how meaning itself is gestated, contested, and ultimately reconfigured through its frame.

Throughout this dissertation, I often rely on the nomenclature of the black Atlantic instead of the Caribbean to characterize the assemblage of writers evoked here. As I understand it, the Black Atlantic is not just a geographic space—it is a condition, a history, a rupture, and a mode of relation. The Black Atlantic is the hold of the ship, the plantation, the maroon settlement, the marketplace, the prison—it is the ongoing afterlife of slavery, the fluid and fractured space where African, Caribbean, and diasporic blackness are in constant motion, constantly remaking themselves. Paul Gilroy³ theorized it as a

³ Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) is a foundational text in Black studies, one that radically reorients how we think about race, culture, and modernity beyond the constraints of national borders. Gilroy's central argument challenges the tendency to view black identity as something contained within the frameworks of the nation-state or geographic region—whether African, Caribbean, British, or American. Instead, he theorizes the Black Atlantic as a transnational, fluid space of cultural exchange and transformation, forged in the violence of the transatlantic slave trade and its enduring afterlives. He pushes back against rigid cultural essentialism, arguing that blackness has always been shaped through movement, hybridity, and exchange across the Atlantic world, making it inherently diasporic. *The Black Atlantic* intervenes in discussions around modernity, arguing that black people have been central to shaping modernity rather than merely suffering under it. The Middle Passage, slavery, and diaspora were not peripheral to the development of Western thought, culture, and capitalism—they were foundational.

counternarrative to restrictive national frameworks, arguing that black identity cannot be confined to borders but must be understood as it is shaped by movement, memory, and survival across the water. However, to use Black Atlantic as an organizing principle also implies a particular genealogy of theory, localized often under the rubric of Black Studies—in this case, that genealogy might begin with Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and make stops at Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*, Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, and Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*. In my experience, certain enunciations of the Black Atlantic tends to privilege anglophone, North American texts; as a result, there is often little to no crossover between the reimagined canons of, for example, Black Studies and Caribbean Studies.

Despite the recognition that the women writers whose voices I privilege in this dissertation generally self-identity as Caribbean writers or scholars of Caribbean women and literature, I have chosen to follow the example of theorist Katherine McKittrick in de-emphasizing the capitalized B of Black Atlantic:

"But I want to read *The Black Atlantic*, and the black Atlantic, differently: as an 'imbrication of material and metaphorical space,' in part because the text is so noticeably underscored by a very important black geography, the Atlantic Ocean, through which the production of space can be imagined on diasporic terms... That is, metaphors of the middle passage or the Atlantic Ocean are never simply symbolic renditions of placelessness and vanishing histories— this is too easy and, in my view,

reinforces the idea that black scholars and writers are ungeographic, trapped in metaphors that seemingly have no physical resonance."
(*Demonic Grounds* xx-xxi)

In this passage, McKittrick argues for a different signification of black Atlantic as both "material and metaphorical space," reflecting my investigation into the hybrid material and metaphorical grammar of the womb in geographies inflected by the intense transcontinental exchange of the slave trade. As a result, I've chosen to use black Atlantic to unsettle any institutionalized genealogies of thought and hopefully open space to put anglophone and francophone writers in conversation with each other, given their shared diasporic lived experiences and inheritances. Ideally, the lowercase black Atlantic is meant to resist institutionalized genealogies of thought and create space for an interdisciplinary, multilingual conversation across anglophone and francophone contexts.

Likewise, monstrosity is not merely a metaphor in this dissertation—it is a framework for interrogating the very boundaries of the human, the maternal, and the epistemological structures that define who and what is deemed legible within the social order. To call something *monstrous* is to mark it as aberrant, as excessive, as a body or idea that unsettles the normative structures of meaning. This dissertation takes monstrosity as both an aesthetic and political condition—one that is not only imposed upon black maternity but also strategically reclaimed within black feminist and Caribbean literary traditions.

Etymologically, the word *monstrous* descends from the following, a genealogy that does not inherently rely on ideas of interspecies mingling—it comes from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning a portent or omen, and *monere*, to warn (“Monstrous, Adj., Adv., Int., N.”). The monstrous is that which signals crisis, an interruption in the order of things. It is also deeply entangled with desire and transgression, as Christina Sharpe reminds us in *Monstrous Intimacies*, where monstrosity is not simply about horror but about the unsettling of categories, particularly those that regulate race, kinship, and the body. Within the framework of this dissertation, monstrosity is thus an aesthetic and a language that disrupts colonial narratives of lineage, inheritance, and reproduction—narratives that have historically functioned to police black maternal labor and its perceived excesses.

Sylvia Wynter’s critical intervention into the overrepresentation of Man offers a crucial entry point for understanding how monstrosity operates as a structural condition rather than an exception. If Man is constructed through colonial and biocentric logics that separate the human from the animal, the rational from the irrational, then the monstrous is the figure that refuses these divisions. The monstrous mother, in particular, disrupts the biopolitical script that demands maternal reproductivity serve the interests of capital, whether through the direct commodification of enslaved women's reproductive capacities

or through contemporary racialized anxieties around black maternity and welfare. Monstrosity, then, is the site where the colonial order betrays its own incoherence, revealing the cracks in the epistemes that claim to fix the limits of the human. Saidiya Hartman's work further illuminates how monstrosity is mapped onto black female reproduction. In *The Belly of the World*, Hartman underscores how the reproductive capacities of black women have been systematically excluded from narratives of labor, radicalism, and even resistance itself. The "monstrous" future that black maternity supposedly produces is not only a specter of colonial anxiety—it is also a refusal of the logics that determine what counts as a viable, recognizable life. The monstrous mother does not reproduce subjects that can be easily assimilated into the social order; instead, she births fugitives, ghosts, and illegible kin.

This dissertation engages monstrosity as both a condition imposed upon black maternal figures and as a strategic aesthetic deployed by black Atlantic writers. In these works, monstrosity functions as a formal and thematic disruption of the assumptions governing kinship, maternity, and the limits of human subjectivity. These texts do not seek to rehabilitate black maternity within the framework of respectability; instead, they embrace its excess, its grotesquerie, its capacity to generate meaning beyond the colonial calculus of reproduction. Crucially, monstrosity is not always abjection—it is also insurgency. By refusing

the stabilizing narratives of domesticity, nurture, and biological inevitability, monstrous mothers in these texts unsettle the very grammar of the human. They refuse legibility, evade containment, and insist on modes of being that exceed the frameworks imposed upon them. In this way, monstrosity in these texts does not just signify the distortion of the human—it signals an alternative to it. In mobilizing monstrosity as a theoretical framework, this dissertation foregrounds its function as a methodology of refusal and reimagination. If monstrosity is that which unsettles, then to think with monstrosity is to reject the epistemic comforts of coherence and completion. This is not a framework that seeks to recuperate black maternity into normative narratives of humanity; rather, it turns to monstrosity as a site of alternative knowledge production, one that is forged in the wake of violence but is not entirely consumed by it. Ultimately, monstrosity is the framework through which black Atlantic writers theorize the entanglements of kinship, maternity, and coloniality. It is a methodology that resists closure, refusing to allow the black maternal body to be assimilated into an ontology that renders it always already disposable. To theorize monstrosity, then, is to engage in a practice of unsettling—not to tame or discipline the monstrous, but to let it speak, to let it haunt, to let it remake the world on its own terms.

womb-as-grammar

"The slave ship is a womb/abyss. The plantation is the belly of the world. Partus sequitur ventrem—the child follows the belly. The master dreams of future increase. The modern world follows the belly. Gestational language has been key to describing the world-making and world-breaking capacities of racial slavery. What it created and what it destroyed has been explicated by way of gendered figures of conception, birth, parturition, and severed or negated maternity."
— Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World"

In her essay "The Belly of the World," Saidiya Hartman presents a paradox that lingers in the afterlives of slavery—that "gestational language has been key to describing the world-making and world-breaking capacities of racial slavery," yet "most often when the productive labor of the slave comes into view, it is as a category absent gender and sexual differentiation" (166). Hartman argues that in iconic works such as W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction* and C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobins*, "the agency of the enslaved becomes legible as a politics, rather than crime or destruction," but the issues of women's labor aren't easily assimilable into these narratives of labor, strike, resistance, etc. In fact, she contends, according to the current state of the field, "the sexual violence and reproduction characteristic of enslaved women's experience fails to produce a radical politics of liberation or a philosophy of freedom" (167). While she depends on the works of Jennifer Morgan, Hortense Spillers, and Christina Sharpe—who draw

attention to the historical reality of women's centrality and resistance to the slave episteme—in this essay, she seems to consider these works either historical or theoretical works that do not craft a political understanding of women's labor, and she cautions against the risks of excessive metaphorization of women's work:

“If we intend to do more than make the recalcitrant domestic, the outcast, and insurrectionist a figure for our revolutionary longing, or impose yet another burden on black female flesh by making it 'a placeholder for freedom,' then *we must never lose sight of the material conditions of her existence* or how much she has been required to give for our survival.”⁴ (171)

This warning is made manifest in many evocations of the womb-as-metaphor, in the evacuation of the black maternal body and its afterlives from theoretical considerations of the Middle Passage and slave episteme. However, there are also many writers and theorists who insist on the materiality of the black maternal, and in doing so, begin to bricolage a tapestry of resistance and being-political.

For one, in poet and theorist Fred Moten's *In the Break*, Moten insists on the material maternity at the center of black resistance:

"Meanwhile, note *the indistinctness of the conditions of 'mother' and 'enslavement'* in the milieu from which Douglass emerges and which he describes and narrates. This is to say that *enslavement—and the resistance to*

⁴ Emphasis my own.

*enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness (or, perhaps less controversially, the essence of black performance) is a being maternal that is indistinguishable from a being material. But it is also to say something more. And here, the issue of reproduction (the 'natural' production of natural children) emerges right on time as it has to do not only with the question concerning slavery, blackness, performance, and the ensemble of their ontologies but also with a contradiction at the heart of the question of value in its relation to personhood that could be said to come into clearer focus against the backdrop of the ensemble of motherhood, blackness, and the bridge between slavery and freedom."*⁵ (16)

Building upon Frederick Douglass's narrative as his starting point, in this passage Moten explores the complex entanglement of motherhood, enslavement, and blackness, emphasizing how these conditions blur into one another. The indistinctness of "mother" and "enslavement" suggests that black maternal experience under slavery is inseparable from material conditions, reinforcing the idea that blackness itself is shaped by a performative resistance to subjugation (16). By situating black motherhood at the intersection of material production and performance, Moten begins to elaborate a political theory of resistance in which enslaved women's bodies were both sites of economic value and resistance, challenging simplistic understandings of agency and subjectivity, although the body is missing from his framework.

⁵ Emphasis my own.

As we have seen until this point, the womb is a meeting ground between many intersecting, overlapping, and converging meanings. In *Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poiēsis in Black*, linguist and scholar R.A. Judy shares an understanding of grammar that he "hijacked" from Arabic linguist S. Ibbawayhi "who thought of grammar as a technology of imagination through which a set of relations to things in reality and each other is articulated as constituting the human world" (13). Having explored the insufficiency of the categories of metaphor/symbol and materiality for understanding the workings of the womb in the black Atlantic, I propose thinking about the womb as grammar, as a "technology of imagination" that articulates a theory and a praxis of relationality—or more accurately in this context, of *relation*. Faced with the "problematic concerning the capacity of the flesh to embody [reproductive] value," the writers and thinkers of the black Atlantic have constructed a poetics and a grammar of the womb, that organ/concept which already carried both material and metaphysical connotations (Judy 252).

The womb, thus, always already carried the logic of (re)production in its hands and became necessary to the implementation of extractive and consumptive logics in the slave episteme, which rooted themselves in the speculative value of black women's reproductive potentials; if the grammar of the womb is another version of a Du Bois-ian name habit, "which is a systemic

thinking of the world, a common held belief regarding the relationship between signs as representations and the things they reference," then this habit names blackness the potential to produce labor, rather than purely negation or abjection (256). "Womb" articulates the ontological reality of post-slavery blackness, a precise kind of being-in-the-world that was made possible through reproductive violence and labor, as Jennifer Morgan tells us:

"An examination of the complicated rewriting of motherhood that occurs in the context of New World slavery offers instead a narrative of shifting meaning and reconceived foundations *as the private, domestic, and noneconomic woman's womb becomes the site of venture capitalism.*"⁶ (*Laboring Women* 167)

Additionally, as Judy directs us to think about "Negro," the evocations of the womb in black Atlantic literature "[call] into question the entire modern philosophical discourse — from metaphysics to ethics, as well as politics — of the distinction between animal and human" (252). He continues:

"The proper name modern philosophy has given this distinction is Negro, designating that animal thing, the ingestion of which has been a necessity in the realization of modernity's material world, but which cannot be assimilated, cannot be properly digested, although it is ceaselessly consumed." (252)

If modern philosophy has named this marker of difference Negro, then I argue that black Atlantic literature and theory has named it Womb, referencing the

⁶ Emphasis my own.

"[ceaseless] consumption" of the black reproductive potential, that yet cannot be "assimilated" or "properly digested" (pregnancy)—that which unsettles the stomach (252). Those unsettling and indigestible aesthetics are in fact practices of resistance that "articulate appositionally, opening up infinities of other ways of being human in community becoming, ever becoming" (19). To describe the womb as a grammar, then, is to recognize it as more than a metaphor, ellipsis, or asterisk—it is a structuring principle, a syntactical force that dictates how blackness is inscribed, constrained, and resisted across time and space. In the following texts, the grammar of the womb is activated not only through language and linguistic practices but also, and most significantly, through embodied and bodily practices. Offered as a "third way" to the metaphorization of the womb, this dissertation on the grammar of the womb foregrounds the flesh-and-blood realities of black maternity rather than just its abstracted meanings. By pushing against the womb's metaphorization while refusing its pure material reduction, this project seeks to illuminate how black maternal figures in literature and theory enact an ongoing, insurgent grammar—one that rewrites the terms of being, relation, and futurity.

chapters

What I have tentatively called Chapter 1.5, "womb-as-metaphor," actually functions as an addendum to the introduction, taking stock of the many valences

the womb, etymologically and deployed as a metaphor, particularly in black Atlantic theoretical texts. This chapter examines the womb as a critical metaphor in Black Atlantic thought, tracing its complex and often contradictory meanings in the works of scholars and writers such as Gladys Francis, Christina Sharpe, and Édouard Glissant, whose invocations of the womb are now iconic in the field. The womb emerges as a site of transformation, a space that both generates and negates, embodying the violent ruptures of the Middle Passage and the systemic forces that continue to shape Black existence. Ultimately, I argue that throughout these texts, the womb oscillates between being a site of possibility and one of negation, a generative force that is also an extension of the hold, the prison, and the abyss; however, in its abstraction, it risks distancing itself from the lived realities of Black maternity, its fleshly presence swallowed by the very discourse it animates.

Chapter 2, "haunting the womb," examines how Black women writers across the Caribbean and its diaspora use "haunting" to reimagine both history and the maternal body. It opens by demonstrating how Maryse Condé's *Moi, Tituba* recasts the forgotten Tituba of the Salem witch trials as a character who communes with ancestral spirits—especially her mother, Abena, whose presence in death becomes far more loving than in life. The chapter argues that such spectral encounters unsettle Western notions of finality in death and linearity in

history. Rather than viewing ghosts as frightening reminders of trauma, these authors depict them as guides, healers, and companions who invite new modes of relation, knowledge, and care. Citing Maryse Condé, Évelyne Trouillot and Fabienne Kanor, the chapter shows how each was “haunted” into writing by archival absences—such as brief mentions of enslaved women in old logbooks or truncated references to midwives and infanticide in the French Caribbean. Because official records only hint at these women’s existence, the authors imaginatively fill in their stories through intimate conversations with the dead. Haunting thus becomes a powerful creative force that pushes beyond the boundaries of academic history, generating what I call a “de-historical praxis”: a way of writing and remembering that refuses strict facticity and embraces spirit, memory, and the body.

Drawing on theorists such as Avery Gordon and Jacques Derrida, the chapter also shows that “haunting” need not be exclusively tied to fear or negative connotations. In these Caribbean works, ghosts frequently appear during love scenes or moments of re-birth, offering solace, dismantling gendered taboos, or restoring broken maternal relationships. Ultimately, the texts depict a version of haunting that exists in the space in-between “the Actual and the Imaginary” into a world where the dead and the living coexist in reciprocal care, challenging the colonial divisions between life/death, past/present, and

fact/fiction. By embracing the spectral rather than denying it, these writers reclaim the voices and presences of long-silenced women, forging a broader ethics of “living with” ghosts. In doing so, they destabilize the Western lens that relegates spiritual encounters to superstition and instead propose a black Atlantic “hauntology” in which these “lost” mothers, daughters, and ancestors become active agents of healing, memory, and resistance.

Chapter 3, “weaponizing the womb,” explores how women writers of the black Atlantic depict maternal bodies—and, more specifically, acts of infanticide, self-induced abortion, and maternal suicide—as forms of resistance within a racially and sexually oppressive system. Drawing on theoretical frameworks by Achille Mbembe (necropolitics), Hortense Spillers (the “black female body” as “flesh”), and Saidiya Hartman (“scenes of subjugation”), the author illuminates how the womb becomes, paradoxically, a site of both revolt and care. Central to the argument is the legal principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*—the doctrine that “the child follows the womb”—which made Black women’s reproductive capacity an engine of the slave economy and a crucial tool of racist control. By foregrounding literary works from authors such as Évelyne Trouillot, Edwidge Danticat, and Marie-Célie Agnant, this chapter recognizes how fictional mothers weaponize their reproductive powers—sometimes through infanticide or suicide—as an act of “necroresistance.” In other words, they turn the “death-

world” logic of enslavement (the idea that sovereignty is tied to the capacity to decide who may live or die) back onto itself. In so doing, these monstrous mothers question the romanticized or stereotypical roles so often assigned to them, force readers to confront uncomfortable ethical questions, and reject any simplistic notion of maternal sacrifice in favor of a more complicated strategy of revolt, love, and care.

Throughout the chapter, I deploy Gladys Francis' paradigm of the “aesthetic of the odious,” paying attention to viscerally painful, taboo scenes in order to elicit reflective, ethically involved witnessing rather than mere voyeurism. I argue that the odious and the abject, as aesthetic strategies, illustrate how these narratives disrupt linear storytelling, calling upon “spiral” forms of time and cyclical trauma, while simultaneously reclaiming the power to name (or un-name) maternal experiences. Ultimately, the womb, far from being a passive vessel, emerges in these texts as a rebellious technology—a site where life and death are wielded simultaneously against a world order that refuses true freedom and subjectivity to the enslaved or formerly enslaved Black woman.

Chapter 4, “unsettling the womb,” traces how black Atlantic literature reconfigures birth, maternity, and kinship outside of biological Eurocentric narratives of humanism. Through readings of authors like Marie-Célie Agnant, Fabienne Kanor, Maryse Condé, and Edwidge Danticat, the chapter examines

how monstrous births, infanticide, spectral hauntings, and unsettling intimacies disrupt the idea of reproduction as purely generative. Instead, these moments expose the violent legacies embedded in the maternal body, linking birth to racial capitalism, the afterlife of slavery, and the epistemological limits of the human. (Re)appropriations of the monstrous are central to this analysis, not as mere aberration but as a structural condition—an aesthetic and theoretical mode through which black women’s reproductive labor has been cast outside of and resists humanist narratives. Drawing from thinkers like Sylvia Wynter, Zakiyyah Jackson, and Saidiya Hartman, the chapter reveals how black maternity has historically been both erased and overdetermined, caught in a paradox where its labor fuels empire but remains illegible within dominant accounts of resistance and radicalism. Through monstrous birth scenes—whether it’s Emma’s grotesque arrival in *Le Livre d’Emma* or Marie’s horrifying labor in *Humus*—these texts refuse the “natural” associations of motherhood, instead rendering the womb as a site of haunting, rupture, and nonontological becoming.

This analysis also expands into unsettling kinship, showing how slavery’s logic of *partus sequitur ventrem* (the child follows the womb) creates a genealogical wound that reproduces social death rather than familial belonging. Against this, black Atlantic writers invent alternative forms of relation—through chosen mothers, spectral inheritances, and poetic insurgencies—that refuse

colonial definitions of the human. Figures like Tituba in *Moi, Tituba* or Agnant's Emma reject bloodline as a measure of kinship, choosing instead to reimagine belonging through acts of resistance and storytelling. Ultimately, the chapter argues that unsettling the womb is necessary to unsettling the coloniality of being itself. By refusing the biologics of the slave episteme, these works enact what Sylvia Wynter calls an epistemic rupture—exposing the fiction of the human as it has been historically constructed and opening up space for other ways of knowing, sensing, and existing.

1.5 womb-as-metaphor

“I dreamt once that our knowledge, our black women’s knowledge, was changed into milk, into good frothy milk, into good, completely blue milk, so white it was, and we gave it to everyone to suckle. We were a colony of black women, and we moved forward, bearing in our open arms our full breasts. Then some men suddenly appeared in immense ships; they captures us, tied us up, put us in shackles, and led us off. They sold us; they paid a good price for us, they felt us up, they weighed our breasts, the bids increased. Those who didn’t want to think anymore threw themselves upon us. We were fountains of knowledge. Just as in the past they chained us up so that we would give our breasts full of life to all the white children to protect the white breasts of their white mothers, we gave to all the milk of our knowledge.”¹
– Marie-Célie Agnant, *Le Livre d'Emma*

Francophone specialist and intellectual Gladys Francis begins her critical work *Odious Caribbean Women and the Palpable Aesthetics of Transgression* by reminiscing on a conference she attended in Accra, Ghana, during which she participated in collective rituals, engaged with works of performance art, and

¹ “ — J’ai rêvé une fois que notre savoir, à nous les Negresses, se transformait en lait, en bon lait mousseux, en bon lait tout bleu à force d’être blanc, et nous le donnions à téter à tous. Nous étions une colonie de Nègresses et nous avançons, en rang d’oignons, portant à bout de bras nos mamelles pleines. Surgissaient alors des hommes dans d’immenses bateaux, ils nous saisissaient, nous ligotaient, nous mettaient la langue et nous emmenaient. On nous vendait, on nous achetait au prix fort, on nous tâtait, on soupesait nos mamelles, les enchères montaient. Tous ceux qui ne voulaient plus se fatiguer les méninges se jetaient sur nous. Nous étions les fontaines du savoir. Tous comme jadis on nous enchaînait pour que nous donnions nos mamelles pleines de vie à tous les petits Blancs pour protéger les blanches mamelles de leurs blanches mères, nous donnions à tous le lait de notre savoir.” (33)

formed connections with fellow conference-goers. Francis reflects on the significance of the land on which they met and the proximity of the ocean:

“We seemed to always circle back and discuss the roughness of the Atlantic Ocean roaming right before us. During our 'making-sense of the sea of passage,' we talked about its hunger and anger; we perceived it as a womb and a repository of the undocumented (screams, flesh, blood, and bones of ancestors); it was undeniably one of the sites of our collective Afro-Diasporic history and memory.” (x)

This moment of reflection reveals many of the intersecting valences and implications of the womb in black Atlantic thought, in particular the use of womb metaphorically, as syntactical shorthand for the "rebirth" of kidnapped, captive Africans as slaves during the transatlantic slave trade. In this passage, Francis powerfully reflects on the Atlantic Ocean as both a material space and a deeply symbolic one; the Atlantic is described as "hungry" and "angry," imbuing it with emotion and agency to acknowledge the ocean as an active witness *and* participant in the Middle Passage; and finally it is both a womb (a source of origin, transformation, and rebirth) and a tomb (a final resting place for the "screams, blood, and bones of ancestors") (x). The transatlantic slave trade was not just a movement of bodies but a systematic rupture—an enforced migration that transformed African lives into capital, inscribing racial slavery as the foundation of modernity. For over four centuries, European empires extracted millions from the African continent, severing lineages, dismantling communities,

and casting human beings into the abyss of the Middle Passage. The hold of the slave ship was a site of compression, where bodies were stacked in unbearable proximity, stripped of names and kinship, forced into an existence defined by deprivation, violence, and the constant threat of death. The ocean itself became a repository of this trauma, swallowing the remains of those who were thrown overboard, whether as discarded cargo or as acts of refusal—bodies that haunt the Atlantic as both lost and remembered.

Despite the fact that Francis doesn't elaborate on their collective perception of the ocean as a womb, the overlapping features are tangible: the enveloping liquids, the waves of contractions (and ultrasounds), and the passage from one state of being to another. There is also a tangibly ironic, if not downright satirical, sense to womb-as-metaphor for the Middle Passage; if womb in its usual sense signifies a site where young "are protected till birth," then the slave trade was its polar opposite ("Uterus"). It has, instead, become nearly synonymous with a site of "collective Afro-Diasporic history and memory" marked by vulnerability, danger, and ultimately death (Francis, *Odious Caribbean Women* x). She comes back to this image during her discussion of Maryse Condé's *Pension les Alizés*:

"The mother's womb recalls the slave ship. It symbolizes danger and death; it is the earthly and water space of passage. There is a blurring of spaces and senses: the adored mother, the beloved island; the ocean

waters, the womb's liquids; the womb, the tomb; the known, the unknown; the ritual, the unritual (Loichot); the desired, the felt, and the forgotten." (83-84)

Ultimately, the use of womb as a metaphor, in Francis' personal anecdote and in the Caribbean literature that she reads, highlights three distinct and common themes: first, the hold of the slave ship as a womb of violent birth, where enslaved people were forcibly remade; second, the sea as an amniotic space, holding both history and the spirits of the dead; and finally, the Middle Passage as a paradoxical birth canal, where the forced migration created new diasporic identities through immense suffering.

Christina Sharpe extends this metaphoric use of the womb in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* as she draws the reader's attention to the persistent ways of (non)being and living take place "in the wake" of the slave ship. In the second chapter, "The Ship: The Trans*atlantic," Sharpe introduces and analyzes the film *The Forgotten Space—A Film Essay Seeking to Understand the Contemporary Maritime World in Relation to the Symbolic Legacy of the Sea* (2010) to launch her consideration of the ship and its meanings in the afterlives of slavery. This film, which attempts to establish the ocean as an essential site of globalization, features a segment called "former mother" that features the testimony of Aereile Jackson, which both inspires and troubles Sharpe:

“I had held out some hope that this film that looks at the maw of capital wouldn’t simply feed her into it, wouldn’t simply use her as a container for all of that unremarked-upon history, *would not use her as an asterisk or an ellipsis to move forward the narrative...* But though she provides the terms and the image, if not the exact words, that give the segment its name, Aereile Jackson appears only to be made to disappear. *She is metaphor.* Her appearance in the film makes no sense within the logic of the film as it unfolds; yet it makes perfect sense, for, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013, 93) write, ‘modernity,’ the very modernity that is the subject of this film, ‘is sutured by this hold.’ *The hold is the slave ship hold; is the hold of the so-called migrant ship; is the prison; is the womb that produces blackness.*”² (27)

Here, Sharpe elucidates the danger inherent in the metaphorization of the material; to be metaphor is to be evacuated of any sense of inherent meaning, and in the case of living persons, of any subjectivity or agency that isn't instrumentalized for another's purposes. To be metaphor (metaphor, not a metaphor) is to be an empty "container," destined to fall prey to the same logics of consumption and erasure that have define the institution and afterlives of slavery (27). Sharpe's critique of this film's use of Aereile Jackson recalls Hortense Spillers' biting critique of ethnicity: "Under its hegemony, the human body becomes a defenseless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor" (66). Sharpe continues to

² Emphasis my own.

develop her critique of the film's portrayal of Jackson as a "specter" meant to represent and speak for "blackness," and its relationship to the oceanic (29).

Deconstructing the term opportunity, which contains traces of the ocean and trade through "port," Sharpe argues that black abjection cannot and should not be used as an opportunity for linguistic performances of equivalence:

"It is as if with her appearance capital is suddenly historicized in and through her body. She is opportune. They see in her an *opportunity* (from the Latin *ob-*, meaning "toward," and *portu(m)*, meaning "port"). But Jackson wasn't ejected from the system: she is the ejection, the abjection, by, on, through, which the system reimagines and reconstitutes itself. 'Violence precedes and exceeds blacks'... *The suffering of Black people cannot be analogized; 'we' are not all claimed by life in the same way; 'we' do not experience suffering on the same plain of conflict, since the Black is characterized, as Wilderson tells us, by gratuitous violence...*"³ (29)

This critique of metaphor and analogy opens new paths to read and understand the series of equivalences⁴ made at the end of Sharpe's argument—"The hold is the slave ship hold; is the hold of the so-called migrant ship; is the prison; is the womb that produces blackness" (27). Under the terms of Sharpe's own critique, this series of terms establishes the womb as a site of black abjection, a geographical space akin to that of the slave ship, migrant ship, and prison; however, the womb is set apart from these other geographical allusions as the only site that performs an action. The womb anthropomorphizes the ship, the

³ Emphasis my own.

⁴ An equivalence that Sharpe begins unsettling in the succeeding chapter, "The Hold."

hold, and the prison. The use of womb in the list of likenesses, a substitutive list, allows Sharpe to gesture towards a productive and generative quality that seems to be missing from the usual senses of hold, ship, and prison ("the womb that produces blackness") (27). Notably, blackness produced by this womb, this hold-as-womb, is blackness defined as abjection and excess. In this—and many other—case(s) across the black Atlantic archive, the metaphor of the womb constructs the womb as the space "in which something is originated, produced or developed" ("Womb, N."). Borrowing Sharpe's own grammar, we might say the hold-as-womb is haunted by the material maternal body (it implies the existence of an immaterial maternal body), and it asterisks the issue of the black maternal, for another time or another chapter.

In the following chapter, "The Hold," Sharpe explicitly takes up the question of the hold-as-womb and the maternal body in the section "The Belly of the Ship":

"Reading together the Middle Passage, the coffle, and, I add to the argument, the birth canal, we can see how each has functioned separately and collectively over time to dis/figure Black maternity, to turn the womb into a factory producing blackness as abjection much like the slave ship's hold and the prison, and turning the birth canal into another domestic Middle Passage with Black mothers, after the end of legal hypodescent, still ushering their children into their condition; their non/status, their non/being-ness...

The birth canal of Black women or women who birth blackness, then, is another kind of domestic Middle Passage; the birth canal, that passageway from the womb through which a fetus passes during birth.

The belly of the ship births blackness; the birth canal remains in, and as, the hold. The belly of the ship births blackness (as no/relation). Think now of those incarcerated women in the United States who are forced to give birth while shackled, their pain ignored. They are forced to deliver while shackled even when that shackling is against the law. Birthing in the belly of the state: birthed in and as the body of the state."

In this oft-cited passage, Sharpe reasons that Black women's reproductive experiences have been systematically shaped by the same structures that historically oppressed Black bodies, such as the slave ship, the hold, and the coffle. Black women's wombs are likened to factories producing blackness as abjection, mirroring the conditions of the slave ship's hold and the prison system, not through a consideration of *partus sequitur ventrem* or reproductive violence so much as through the end product (blackness, rather than black babies or people).

This subtle tension is most evident (to me) on the following page, when Sharpe further explores the similarities between the prison and the hold:

"US incarceration rates and carceral logics directly emerging from slavery and into the present continue to be the signs that make Black bodies. See, in figure 3.2, an image of prisoners in Malawi (2005) that evokes nothing so much as the hold of the slave ship transformed into the prison ship. The prison repeats the logics, architectural and otherwise, of the slave ship (in and across the global Black Diaspora)." (75)

This quotation, which reformulates her argument from the previous page, does so in the absence of the womb. So what does womb do for Sharpe's argument?

What does it add to this chain of equations? Nothing so much as the logic of creation and proliferation, the underlying theoretical shape—a comparison that

appears throughout the theories and literatures of the black Atlantic. Without critiquing or detracting from Sharpe's vital interventions in Black studies, I argue that this use of womb-as-metaphor is critical to understanding the grammar of the womb in general. Particularly within the North American context, the womb has been extricated from its senses as the belly or the uterus, as fleshy organs, and has instead become a central symbol for the process of transformation into blackness. I suspect that this extrication is doubled in the grammar itself—in English, I would argue that "belly" and "womb" have taken on distinct masks of meaning, despite their semantic and etymological overlap⁵. While womb can and does refer to the uterus, its metaphorical and symbolic associations have overshadowed its bodily meanings; on the other hand, belly seems to encompass the stomach and the abdomen, conjuring an image of digestion, swelling and curves that is almost always embodied⁶. At first glance, belly-as-digestion contrasts with womb-as-birth as these processes seem to end in opposite ways (dissolution vs creation), yet it is that exact overlap that is so evocative in the

⁵ Thinking about Sharpe's constructions in "The Belly of the Ship," the birth canal, that passageway from the womb through which a fetus passes during birth. The belly of the ship births blackness; the birth canal remains in, and as, the hold. The belly of the ship births blackness (as no/relation) ...Birthing in the belly of the state: birthed in and as the body of the state," a perfectly legible French translation might use *ventre* for each appearance of belly and womb in the English.

⁶ Belly is also often used to anthropomorphize non-human life and geography in harmful ways that justify penetration and violence through this analogy to the maternal body (i.e. the belly of the beast, the belly of Africa). As Dionne Brand catches herself thinking in *A Map of the Door of No Return*, "In 1486 John Afonso of Aveiro reached the kingdom of Benin. My journey is more than eighteen hours long. Down the belly of Africa. Why do I slip into the easy-enough metaphor of Africa as body, as mother?"

black Atlantic theoretical canon: "The belly of the ship births blackness (as no/relation)" (74). What is so evocative about formulations Sharpe's extended allusion to and metaphor of the womb is that she deftly weaves between many of these different implications, asking the reader to consider the material reality of birth in a prison alongside the womb as a metaphor for the process through which blackness is birthed.

Here, and throughout black Atlantic theory, the womb-as-metaphor symbolizes the suffix "-ation", associating states of being and geographic sites with "an action or process," with the added sense of generation (transformation as emergence)—and is thus an incredibly useful syntactical shorthand when studying the logics and realities of the slave episteme⁷ ("-ation, *Suffix*). As poet and writer Dionne Brand beautifully articulates in *A Map of the Door of No Return*, one of the most poignant and painful experiences of being in the Black Diaspora is that of (nonconsensual) transformation:

"Transform us into being. That one door transformed us into bodies emptied of being, bodies emptied of self-interpretation, into which new interpretations could be placed. Phantasm, chimera, vision, Ellison's invisibility. Spook is a derogatory description, but it speaks to the psychological arrangements of the describer entering the sign. Entering and occupying the sign. I am, we are, in the Diaspora, bodies occupied,

⁷ In *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, Alys Weinbaum develops the term and concept of the "slave episteme" (referencing Foucault's work on epistemes) to refer to the "thought system that is subtended by the persistence of what Saidiya Hartman calls 'a racial calculus and a political arithmetic,' ... that was brewed up in the context of Atlantic slavery" (1).

emptied and occupied. If we return to the door it is to retrieve what was left, to look at it — even if it is an old sack, threadbare with time, empty itself of meaning."

However, as the womb becomes shorthand⁸ for this ontological (and material) metamorphosis (what Sharpe might call an un-ontologization), it takes on additional baggage—such as the logics of dehumanization ("this dehumaning of the coffle") and blackness as negation ("non/status... non/being-ness") which have also been questioned as nihilistic representations of blackness (Sharpe 74). In this particular genealogy of black theory and the womb-as-metaphor, the womb to tomb pipeline is dramatically visualized and re-tooled into womb-as-tomb, in a very different way than Francis' reading of Caribbean literature, in the following section of Sharpe's book "'Cradle to Grave,' Womb to Tomb." Despite using womb in the title, it never appears in this section again, a section that is dedicated to the ways childhood is interrupted by the blackness, defined here as a living in the present tense of death.

Sharpe began her section "The Belly of the Ship" by citing one of the most conspicuous examples of the womb-as-metaphor in the black Atlantic oeuvre, the oft-cited *Poétique de la relation*. In this 1990 work, poet-philosopher Édouard Glissant infamously evokes the womb as a metaphor that highlights the

⁸ Yet both Sharpe and Dionne do also create openings for the possibilities and potentials of non-human being that emerge from this black(ened) womb.

transformative properties of the Middle Passage. In his three philosophical works that precede *Poétique de la Relation* (*Soleil de la conscience* in 1956; *L'Intention poétique* in 1969; and *Le Discours antillais* in 1891), Glissant establishes the theoretical foundations of "a language that would be fully Antillean," a foundation that he "build[s]... with rocks" (Glissant xi). In *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant wields that language to pronounce the slave ship a gestational sac in which living beings were reborn as the living dead—to construct a new grammar:

"What is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown. First, the time you fell into the belly of the boat. For, in your poetic vision, a boat has no belly; a boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death."⁹ (6)

In this passage, in order to explicate the trauma of the Atlantic slave trade, Glissant also anthropomorphizes the slave ship, likening it to the body of a

⁹ "Le terrifiant est du gouffre, trois fois noué à l'inconnu. Une fois donc, inaugurale, quand tu tombes dans le ventre de la barque. Une barque, selon ta poétique, n'a pas de ventre, une barque n'engloutit pas, ne dévore pas, une barque se dirige à plein ciel. Le ventre de cette barque-ci te dissout, te précipite dans un non-monde où tu cries. Cette barque est une matrice, le gouffre-matrice. Génératrice de ta clameur. Productrice aussi de toute unanimité à venir. Car si tu es seul dans cette souffrance, tu partages l'inconnu avec quelques-uns, que tu ne connais pas encore. Cette barque est ta matrice, un moule, qui t'expulse pourtant. Enceinte d'autant de morts que de vivants en sursis." (Glissant 18)

mother, to emphasize the Middle Passage as metamorphous process (7). Like the womb, the space of the slave ship is a space of unmaking and remaking — of potentialities made corporeal. Someone was implanted, someone — or -thing — other emerged. Glissant begins this passage by evoking the terror of the abyss, or *gouffre*. This word, carefully chosen over the similar French *abîme* for example, evokes many of the key concepts in this excerpt and this work overall. Although in the modern era *gouffre* connotes a chasm, abyss, or gulf, most often a geological formation, it is descended from the Greek *kolpos*, which meant a "bay, [or] gulf of the sea" but came from "'bosom'... [and a] 'curved shape'" ("Gouffre"; "Gulf (n)."). Thus, the concatenation of the water, the woman's body, and the void begins — "[what] is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown" (Glissant 6). Glissant's language reflects this rocky formation — the curve of the ship cutting through water on its way to the Americas is the curve of the mother's belly, haunted by the unknown of the so-called New World.

In the next line, Glissant more directly invokes the womb with the word *ventre*, which is the most common translation of womb into French, even though the usual meaning of *ventre* is closer to stomach ("Ventre."; "Womb."). As he delves further into this metaphor, Glissant tracks a series of negations — the first being his interlocutor's assumption that a boat "does not swallow ... [or] devour" (6). Yet, paradoxically, the slave ship digests the interlocutor [in this case, an

enslaved person] in an inversed scene of childbirth in which the enslaved is thrust into a nonworld instead of being introduced to the world, and the expected cry of a newborn is instead a cry of death: "Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out" (6). The translation of this work highlights the distinction between belly/womb, one that might not be as present in the French. I suspect that in French, *ventre* is always both stomach and womb, belly and uterus; thus, a womb can digest, and a belly can birth. In fact, these overlapping definitions open space for an explicit consideration of maternity as consumption, as we will see in Fabienne Kanor's *Humus* for example.

This dynamic is the basis for Glissant's thesis that "[this] boat is a womb, a womb abyss" ("*Cette barque est une matrice, le gouffre-matrice.*") and establishes the foundation of Glissant's use of the womb as a metaphor for the Middle Passage (6). The layers of French synonyms here for "womb" (*le ventre* for belly and *la matrice* for womb) highlight Glissant's figurative use of "womb" as "a place or medium in which something is originated, produced, or developed" rather than as a literal uterus (OED Online). While *la matrice* (matrix) has been used historically to refer to a uterus or womb, it more commonly refers to a matrix or mold, both of which evoke a technological or mathematical sense of reproduction than a bodily one, once again overlooking the flesh in favor of metaphor:

“Our first unremembered thoughts and feelings start in what was once in medieval English called the *matris*, *matrice* or *matrix*, not a computer simulation but the womb's crimson nightclub, dimly it, is heartbeat bass thumping. *Matrix* seems a fitting name for the place in which our existence is generated. First in Latin and then in English, *matrix* describes a thing which produces something else, especially a means to reproduce an item more than once. Across the course of its history in English, *matrix* has named not only the womb but also the metal blocks in which letters are engraved for the casting of type, or the die or stamp on which coins are struck, or the engraved tool which you press into wax to seal a document.” (Nuttall 100)

In Glissant's hands, womb-as-sign is ruptured and re-cast; instead of signifying flesh and organs, the greys and pinks and red of tissue and blood, or the so-called miracle of life, womb-as-signifier expresses dark depths and murky unknowns, the plastics and metallics of technological reproduction, and the abstract *and* material welding of blackness to death.

Glissant follows his famous declaration that "this boat is a womb, a womb abyss" with two reformulations or definitions of this "womb-abyss": "Generator of your clamor. Producer of all the coming unanimity as well"¹⁰ (28). These terms, generator and producer, are primarily technological and/or economic terms that

¹⁰ My own translation of "Génératrice de ta clameur. Productrice aussi de toute unanimité à venir" (Glissant 18). In the Betsy Wing translation, these terms (located in sentence fragments in the original French) are translated into the third-person singular to create a complete sentence in the English edition. Thus, "Génératrice de ta clameur. Productrice aussi de toute unanimité à venir" becomes "It generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity," which slightly detracts from the equivalence being made between the boat (*la barque*), the womb (*la matrice*), the generator (*génératrice*), and the producer (*productrice*) (Glissant 18, 6). This equivalence is further reinforced in the French by the grammatical accord between *la matrice* and *productrice/génératrice*, which are in their feminine forms.

further objectify the womb, ostensibly to reference the biocapitalist equation of a person to property that occurred in the hold of the slave ship. Interestingly, the objects being created in this case (clamor and unanimity) imply both a mass of people and a homogeneity within that group—if Glissant's slave-ship-as-womb-abyss is more of a mold or matrix, then he is underpinning the idea that it imposes unwilling uniformity and unfortunate solidarity on the enslaved people who became the malleable material for this replication process. In his essay "Errant Notes on a Caribbean Rhizome," Max Hantel also notes Glissant's juxtaposition of the language of "pregnancy and generation" alongside the language of "death and suffering":

"With this death and suffering, however, there is the language of pregnancy and generation. Victims of the slave trade are not only 'dissolved' into the hold of the ship, but precipitated in a yet-unknown form; the ship 'generates the clamor of [their] protests,' producing, in other words, new modes of resistance and political grammars; initially solitary, new relationships and communities form in the crucible of shared suffering."

According to Hantel, Glissant argues that the boat-as-womb created "new modes of resistance and political grammar... [and] new relationships and communities" in the wake of the Middle Passage. However, I would argue that these meanings are only present in faint whispers in this passage. Glissant's overlapping valences cloud the literal invocations of reproduction with industrial ones and veil the "language of pregnancy and generation" with a funereal shroud (Hantel).

Furthermore, Glissant equates this "(re)birth" of the slave, through the boat-as-womb, to a kind of negation, emphasizing the *unmaking* of the subject—"This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death" (6). In these sentences, Glissant uses the French "matrice" again where the translator uses "womb" and "moule" where the translator uses "matrix" ("*Cette barque est ta matrice, un moule...*") (18). Similarly to *matrice*, *moule* can connote a recipient, a (baking) mold, or a model ("Moule"). The slippage between these three terms (*le ventre, la matrice, le moule*) in this passage reveals the gradual evacuation of the body and the flesh, particularly of the black maternal, from the womb in Glissant's "poetic vision" (6). Glissant's formulation highlights the social death¹¹ of the slave, as even those who "survive" the Middle Passage are on borrowed time, existing in a suspended state or sentence of death ("*en sursis*"¹²), as seen in the last sentence of this paragraph: "*Enceinte d'autant de morts que de vivants en sursis*" (18). This final sentence further stresses the instrumentalization of pregnancy and the womb as

¹¹ Orlando Patterson's theory of social death is a concept he developed in his book *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982). It describes the condition of enslaved people as existing outside the social and moral order of the dominant society. Patterson argues that slavery is not just about forced labor but also about a profound form of social alienation.

¹² The French term "en sursis" translates to "on probation," "suspended," or "pending" in English, depending on the context. It generally refers to a temporary or conditional status where the outcome depends on future actions or circumstances. The term "en sursis" has a significant relationship to death and the death penalty, particularly in legal and existential contexts. It conveys the idea of a temporary reprieve from death, where the final outcome is uncertain or deferred.

sources of poetic inspiration—an anthropomorphism that goes hand in hand with the abstraction of the maternal body. This metaphor evacuates the mother from the maternal body and applies an extreme fatalism to the very real experiences of maternity in the wake of the Middle Passage, what Moon Charania for example calls "necro-metaphorization—a metaphor not just of death but of *death worlds*, a metaphor of a life that is perpetually threatened with or close to death" (2).

In her essay "The Birthplace of Relation: Edouard Glissant's 'Poétique de la relation: For Ranko'," Stanka Radović frames Glissant's opening excerpt as a distinctly Caribbean "myth of creation" featuring "a generative place, or, more precisely, a cosmogonic matrix"—in this case, the boat-as-womb-abyss (476). As in all creation myths, maternity and birth play a huge role in setting the scene for this beginning, and what is born is not an individual, but a culture, a community, and a way of being:

"The abysmal pain and disorientation of the slave ship provide Glissant with the site of initial destruction, which is, paradoxically, also a site of initial creation... Glissant describes the slave ship as an infernal mother, whose belly, pregnant with bodies alive and dead, will release into the world a culture not only transformed by the voyage, but also aware of and strengthened by its obstinate survival... This desperate birth into the New World, above all, marks the initial moment and the enduring trace of colonial violence. In response to a very different New World of Columbus and his followers, Glissant imagines another world, also new, but stained by the newness of a forced creation: a violent, chaotic, and creative cosmogony of the Caribbean slave." (476)

Recasting this passage as a creation myth highlights the primarily "discursive [and distinctly poetic] matrix which enables the generation of a Caribbean identity through discourse" imagined by Glissant (479). The two-fold significance of this creation myth is also picked up by Patrick Chamoiseau when he considers this very same passage and points out that this "destruction [is] both real and symbolic"¹³ (50). In Chamoiseau's poetic vision, the boat is recast as an "infernal womb" from which "stupefied material [or] zombie[s]" are (re)born instead of Africans or humans¹⁴ (50). In both Glissant and Chamoiseau's works, in an attempt to think through and represent the violence of the Middle Passage, the womb is demonized, perverted, and abstracted from the everyday violence done to the body. While the "real" dimensions of this destruction are acknowledged by both, they are largely ignored in favor of a poetic image and a source of inspiration.

This is further evidenced by Chamoiseau's later conclusions, when he directly alludes to Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 as he sermonizes on Césaire, Glissant, and Perse:

¹³ Translation my own. Original: "C'est un lieu de destruction à la fois réel et symbolique" (Chamoiseau 50).

¹⁴ Translation my own. Original: "...ce ventre infernal. Il sera symboliquement, spirituellement anéanti. Si bien que celui qui descendra, survivant miraculeux au bout de cet immense voyage, ne sera plus un Africain, ni même vraiment un homme, mais *une matière sidérée*, innervée, un zombi que les planteurs achèteront à vil prix et mettront au travail jour et nuit jusqu'à ce que mort s'ensuive" (Chamoiseau 50).

"At the beginning, there is also the abyss. Césaire will make startling dives into the belly of the slave ship. It is from there that he will bring back the essential of his cry¹⁵. Glissant will name the hold as the site of new arrivals rushed towards diversity. For him, this hold will be simultaneously an abyss and the source of digenesis..."¹⁶

In this excerpt, the womb, the abyss, and the hold are collapsed into the amorphous "womb-abyss," and it in turn produces Césaire and Glissant's moments of poetic genius—yet the mother and the maternal body are conspicuously absent. This infamous example, the womb-abyss, introduces and demonstrates how the "womb" has become more than a word, more than an organ, and become a "living idiom" within a distinctly Caribbean (and in these two cases, masculinist) language in the afterlife of the Middle Passage (Glissant 59).

Glissant continues on reformulate this hypothesis: "Thus, the absolute unknown, projected by the abyss and bearing into eternity the womb abyss and the infinite abyss, in the end became knowledge"¹⁷ (8). Here, Glissant makes a somewhat opaque distinction between abyss, womb-abyss [*gouffre-matrice*] and

¹⁵ Here, Chamoiseau refers to one of Césaire's most famous quotations, taken from *Et les chiens se taisaient*: "Je pousserai d'une telle raideur le grand cri nègre, que les assises du monde en seront ébranlées" (252).

¹⁶ Translation my own. Original: "Dans l'origine, il y a aussi l'abîme. Césaire effectuera de saisissantes plongées dans le ventre du bateau négrier. C'est de là qu'il ramènera l'essentiel de son cri. Glissant nommera la cale comme le lieu d'apparitions nouvelles précipitées vers la diversité. Cette cale sera pour lui à la fois gouffre et source de la digenèse..."

¹⁷ "Et ainsi l'inconnu-absolu, qui était la projection du gouffre-matrice et le gouffre en abîme, à la fin est devenu connaissance." (Glissant 20)

infinite abyss, the "[three links] to the unknown" (6). This distinction highlights the generative and reproductive qualities of the womb as metaphor, qualities that are elided by "infinite abyss" and "abyss" (8). If the abyss, especially the womb-abyss, is generative, then it generates knowledge; the womb and the womb-abyss have been organizing metaphors for epistemology, for the production of knowledge:

"Not just a specific knowledge, appetite, suffering and delight of one particular people, not only that, but knowledge of the whole, greater from having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the whole." (8)

In *Poétique de la relation's* literary descendent, *Poétique de la cale*, Fabienne Kanor obliquely reproduces and refines Glissant's formulation of the boat as a womb by focusing on the hold as a material and metaphorical structure through which the afterlives of the slave trade are lived. In this work, she argues that the hold is the "emblematic image" of the slave trade and its afterlives (77). Additionally, in her third meditation on the hold, she concludes that the hold is pregnant:

"The hold is a pregnant space in Caribbean and African American literatures. It is not merely a physical location, subject to descriptions or serving as a framing device for plots, but an immanent space that resides in the root system of these written expressions... I say that it is the in-the-hold and the outside-the-hold that have given birth to these epics."¹⁸ (213)

¹⁸ Translation my own. Original: "La cale est un lieu prégnant dans les littératures antillaise et noire-américaine. Un lieu non pas seulement physique, sujet aux descriptions ou bien cadre des intrigues, mais un espace immanent qui réside dans le système racinaire de ces expressions écrites... Je dis que c'est l'en-cale le hors-la-cale qui ont enfanté ces épopées." (Kanor, *Poétique* 213)

Building off Glissant's articulations of the boat-as-womb, Kanor's use of "pregnant space"¹⁹ suggests that the hold is not just a site of suffering but also of creation, transformation, and rebirth. Her claim that "these epics" were born from the hold and its aftermath positions the reproductive hold as the condition of possibility for storytelling itself—again the reproductive characteristic of a space (read: its likeness to the womb) has epistemological implications. This characterization reflects Glissant's womb-abyss in many ways, particularly as it highlights the generative qualities of this womb-hold.

Further in *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant again reviews and reformulates his wielding of *matrice*: "This second Plantation matrix, after that of the slave ship, is where we must return to track our difficult and opaque sources"²⁰ (73). In Glissant's caired language, matrix takes on a similar sheen as Foucault's infamous *épistémè*²¹. This quotation may be translated differently, but Glissant uses *matrice* in French to refer to the womb-abyss and the so-called Plantation matrix; furthermore, in each case, he uses *matrice*, or womb, as a metaphor for the

¹⁹ While *prégnant* more commonly translates to "significant," its historic meaning is also pregnant. Considering the last sentence of this paragraph continues the metaphor of birth with the phrase "*c'est l'en-cale et le hors-la-cale qui ont enfanté ces épopées*," I believe my insistence on the grammar of maternity is warranted.

²⁰ "Mais c'est bien à cette deuxième matrice de la Plantation, après celle de bateau négrier, qu'il faut rapporter la trace de nos sources, difficiles et opaques." (Glissant 87)

²¹ In *Les Mots et les choses*, Michel Foucault uses this term to characterize the knowledge trajectories of a particular epoch, the total construct of discursive practices that in turn generate that epoch's epistemologies.

structuring sites of epochs. Glissant emphasizes again the sites as passages and metamorphoses that not only lead to a re-birth or re-becoming but also produce particular kinds of knowledge. The womb, for Glissant, is thus a discursive practice that generates epistemology; it is the underlying shared condition that allows epochs to be compared to each other (the boat-as-womb and the plantation-as-womb), and as a result, "womb" has become imbricated in a particular unfolding of historical time and evolution in which the body is absent.

2. haunting the womb

"One does not chase away ghosts with science, I had told myself. I will not chase the Specter or the vanished ones from the hold. I will let them enter as I always have, as I do when I await my characters and re-transcribe their epics."
— Fabienne Kanor, *Poétique de la cale*

And you, ancestral ghosts, rise alchemical blue from a forest of trapped beasts of instruments of torture of a jujube tree of rotten flesh of a basket of oysters of eyes of an intaglio of halters incised in the beautiful sisal of human skin; I would have words vast enough to contain you, and you earth spread out earth besotted"
— Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*

In trailblazer Maryse Condé's historical novel, *Moi, Tituba, sorcière Noire du Salem*¹, the titular witch Tituba lives with spirits, the ghosts of her lost loved ones, who remain tangibly present to Tituba in their afterlives and who show up for Tituba in death as they could not in life. One such astral figure is Tituba's mother, the rebellious Abena, who is unable to relate to her daughter in life and yet becomes a treasured and beloved spirit guide through her ghostly presence—what Western lore recognizes as haunting. Traumatized by her rape on the slave ship that brought her to Barbados, the rape from which Tituba originated, Abena

¹ Published in English with the title *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* in 1992; translated by her husband Richard Philcox.

attacks the plantation owner with her cutlass when he attempts to sexually assault her, her self-preservation instincts overpowering any lingering maternal ones:

“... My mother struck two blows. The white linen slowly turned scarlet.

They hanged my mother.

I watched her body swing from the lower branches of a silk-cotton tree. She had committed a crime for which there is no pardon. She had struck a white man. She had not killed him, however. In her clumsy rage she had only managed to gash his shoulder.

They hanged my mother.

All the slaves had been summoned to her execution. Once her neck had been broken and her soul had departed, there rose up a clamor of anger and revolt that the overseers silenced with great lashes of their whips.

Taking refuge in one of the women's skirts, I felt something harden in me like lava; a feeling that was never to leave me, a mixture of terror and mourning.

They hanged my mother.” (Condé, *I, Tituba* 8)

Abena's revolt is largely unsuccessful and fundamentally changes the course of Tituba's life—the master still lives, she (Abena) is killed for her actions, her husband (Tituba's stepfather) commits suicide, and Tituba is abandoned, “driven off the plantation by [the plantation owner] at the tender age of seven” (8). While Tituba mourns Abena, she also reflects that Abena had not been not maternal or loving; instead, Tituba distinctly states that “she [Tituba] never stopped reminding her [Abena] of the white sailor who had raped her on the deck of *Christ the King*, while surrounded by a circle of obscene voyeurs. I constantly reminded her of the pain and humiliation” (Condé 6). Abena's perceived lack of

maternal instinct and desire “unsettle[s] customarily positive readings of intergenerational knowledge transmission between women and decouple[s] resistance from the maternal-cum-communal,” inaugurating a new path of resistance for monstrous mothers in the black Atlantic (Glover, *A Regarded Self* 22).

Critically, however, Abena's story does not end in this violent maelstrom—her second life as a spirit begins, and in this life, she develops a close relationship with her daughter, accompanying and advising her throughout her life of turmoil. Once Tituba has been taken in by Man Yaya, who “was hardly of this world and lived constantly in [the] company [of spirits]”, Abena appears to Tituba once more:

“Then I saw my mother. Not the disjointed, tormented puppet swinging round and round among the leaves, but decked out in the colors of Yao's love.
'Mother!' I cried.
She came and took me in her arms. God! How sweet her lips were!
'Forgive me for thinking I didn't love you. Now I know I'll never leave you,' she said.” (9)

This passage troubles the symbolic code of life and death that structures the slave episteme by uncoupling the figure of the man with the experience of living; in “life,” Abena is presented as a facsimile of being, “a disjointed, tormented puppet,” who is incapable of love and *relation* (9). However, as a spirit, she incarnates the “third way,” neither dead, nor alive, and free of the self- and

reproductive alienation that plagued her during her life. From this experience, Tituba learns that "the dead.... are all around us, eager for attention, eager for affection" (10). Here, haunting is healing.

This dynamic of matrilineal haunting is found throughout the black Atlantic imaginary and stands in opposition to a more abject representation of haunting as the traces of trauma and violence in the present. Haunting as a symptom of the abject is intricately entangled with Judeo-Christianity and its imposition in colonial societies as a weapon of civilization. In this chapter, I will attempt to take stock of spectrality in this corpus of texts and construct a black Atlantic theory of haunting that accounts for the non-confrontational dynamic between living things seen in the black Atlantic. In these instances of haunting, the dead-yet-living spirits offer a third path, neither dead nor alive, a different imagination of the third way of social death—the enslaved and their descendants as the living dead, as it were. While reproductive alienation haunts the enslaved and their descendants, appearing as a mark of abjection that is passed down matrilineally, black Atlantic writers also turn to the figures of the spirit and the specter to alleviate pain and offer palliative representations of maternity and *relation*. Both the black Atlantic writers of this corpus (Maryse Condé, Évelyne Trouillot, Fabienne Kanor, Edwidge Danticat, Simone Schwarz-Bart, and Marie-Célie Agnant) and their characters experience deconstruct this doubled haunting

to communicate and construct a new praxis of being that is in tune with their environment, that does not obey the harsh binary of life and death, and in doing so, that charts a third trajectory of being and *relation*.

haunting history

“As I stumbled forward, I was racked by a violent feeling of pain and terror. It seemed that I was gradually being forgotten. I felt that I would only be mentioned in passing in these Salem witchcraft trials about which so much would be written later, trials that would arouse the curiosity and pity of generations to come as the greatest testimony of a superstitious and barbaric age. There would be mention here and there of 'a slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing 'hoodoo.'" There would be no mention of my age or personality. I would be ignored. As early as the end of the seventeenth century, petitions would be circulated, judgments made, rehabilitating the victims, restoring their honor, and returning their property to their descendants. I would never be included! Tituba would be condemned forever! There would never, ever, be a careful, sensitive biography recreating my life and its suffering.” (Condé, *I, Tituba* 110)

Throughout Maryse Condé's careful reconstruction of this black witch's story, Tituba repeats the sentiment “I can look for my story among the witches of Salem, but it isn't there,” anachronistically and metafictionally preoccupied by the violence of her prophesied erasure from History—in some ways, Tituba is already haunted by her future absence (110). She is already haunting Maryse Condé. This palimpsest gestures at this work's origin story, which is one of discovery and of haunting. In an interview with Ann Scarsboro, Condé reveals that she stumbled across a single mention of Tituba, the black witch of Salem (by

nature of being the first and only known black witch of Salem), and become impassioned to share, by imagining, her story:

"AS: How did you first learn about Tituba?

MC: Toward the end of 1995, while in Paris, I was approached by Mme. Gallimard of the Mercure de France publishing house to write the story of a female heroine of my region, the Caribbean... A few months later, I was a Fulbright scholar in residence at Occidental College in Los Angeles, and I went to the UCLA Library in search of documentation. I got lost in the huge building and found myself in the history section in front of a shelf full of books about the Salem witch trials. Looking through them, I discovered the existence of Tituba, whom I had never heard of before...

AS: Did you feel that you were destined to write about her?

MC: I just felt interested by the story and curious to see what happened to Tituba. It is only when I started asking people and historians around me, and did not discover anything factual about her, that I decided I was going to write her story out of my own dreams. *I felt that this eclipse of Tituba's life was completely un-just. I felt a strong solidarity with her, and I wanted to offer her her revenge by inventing a life such as she might perhaps have wished it to be told...*

AS: You have told me that Tituba helped write her own book, in a sense. Did you begin your conversations with her right away?

MC: The conversations went on all the time I was writing the novel. *I had the feeling that Tituba was involved in the writing. Even when I left my pages at night in my study, I believed that she would go look at them, read them, and eventually correct what she did not like. I cannot say when we really started conversing, however. All along during my writing of the novel I felt that she was there—that I was addressing her.*" (Condé, *I, Tituba* 198-200)

Condé narrates the experience of writing this novel in two parts: first, the discovery of a "historical" absence/presence, a trace that alerts one as much to a lack of historiographic material as it does to the existence of a person/anecdote. Second, she describes this feeling of being "compelled to write" this story and of spectral accompaniment, of otherworldly company, during its writing (199).

Condé shares this exact experience with many other black Atlantic writers, including Toni Morrison, Évelyne Trouillot, Edwidge Danticat, and Fabienne Kanor. *Beloved*; *Rosalie, l'infâme*; *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; and *Humus* were all inspired by similar experiences of discovery and possession—these writers discovered evidence of a lack and became possessed, even haunted, by the unjust silences and unknown possibilities of women's lived experiences.

The text of *Moi, Tituba*, begins with Maryse Condé's experience of rapport with Tituba—"Tituba and I lived for a year on the closest of terms. During our endless conversations she told me things she had confided to nobody else"—and ends with a "Historical Note" that recounts what little is known of Tituba's life and persecution as a Salem witch (v). In the same interview with Scarsboro, Condé discloses how her writing sheds the constraints of discipline and genre, key structures through Enlightenment knowledge production are produced and reproduced, and how her experience of supernatural rapport with Tituba enabled alternate ways of knowing, sensing, and believing:

"MC: Tituba is just the opposite of a historical novel. I was not interested at all in what her real life could have been... her deposition testimony... forms the only historical part of the novel... I really invented Tituba... A historian is somebody who studies the facts, the historical facts, somebody who is tied to what actually happens. I am just a dreamer—my dreams rest upon a historical basis. Being a black person, having a certain past, having a certain history behind me, I want to explore that realm and of course I do it with my imagination and with my intuition." (201)

This creative experience is doubled by visionary Évelyne Trouillot's *Rosalie, l'infâme*, which was also inspired by a historical trace of a witchy woman. Herself "haunted" by this historical trace that she had read in Abénon and Cauna's *Antilles 1789 : La Révolution aux Caraïbes*, Trouillot's work traces the contours of this tale in several overlapping realities: the historical inspiration for this story, the cannibalized version of this story told to the protagonist Lisette about her aunt Brigitte, and the commitment that Lisette makes to her unborn child: "May I find the courage to honor my promise: Creole child who still lives in me, you will be born free and rebellious, or you will not be born at all" (129). In this story, mother figures from "Grandma Charlotte" to "Ma Augustine" impart critical memories of the Middle Passage across generations—from the barracoons of West Africa to their transatlantic journey on the slave ship *The Rosalie*.

Rosalie, l'infâme concludes with an "Afterword" written by Trouillot that begins and ends with the now-infamous assertion, "I wasn't intending to write a historical novel"² (131-132). In the same Afterword, Trouillot shares that she "came upon an incident recounted in *La Révolution aux Caraïbes*" about "an Arada midwife who, during her trial, revealed a necklace made of rope that she wore in

² "Je n'ai pas voulu écrire un roman historique." (Trouillot, *Rosalie, l'infâme* 139-140)

which each knot represented one of the seventy children she had killed" (131).

This anecdote in *La Révolution aux Caraïbes*, originally from another work by M. E. Descourtilz, "captivated" Trouillot, who was then "haunted" with "quiet resolution" by the Arada midwife (131). Compelled to write the midwife's story, Trouillot surpassed the limits of history:

"I attempted as best I could to respect the historical context. But I admit that what was most essential for me was to imagine and create men, women, and children living through this infamy filled with complex emotions and passions." (131-132)

Like Condé, Trouillot reckons with history's insufficiency and discards its trappings in favor of imagination and creation, unsettling the boundaries of genre through invention and emotive fullness. For both writerly woman, the experience of "haunting" by these women creates a new *modus operandi* of historical fiction that refuses to objectify living, breathing women to "objects of study"; their accounts of these experiences reveal how writers such as Trouillot and Condé sense their main characters as complex and complete women. They, our writers, do not "speak *for* them... [but instead] imagine them speaking," making the absences present through self-reflexive metanarratives born of haunting (Gordon 150).

This ghostly, creative experience is also shared by the multi-hyphenate (author, filmmaker, chronicler, and theorist) Fabienne Kanor, Condé's "beloved

literary daughter," who begins *Humus* with the excerpt from the captain's logbook of a slave ship, the anecdote that provoked her writing, followed by a note from her own perspective (Kanor and Palermo 193). In this note, she recounts how this the discovery of this "incident" began her writing project and contextualizes what will follow as an exploration of the question, "How to tell, how to retell this story told by men?" (9). In the port city of Nantes, one razor-sharp point of the so-called triangle of trade, Kanor discovered a historical trace that is both presence and absence, both hidden and unveiled: a slave ship captain's record of fourteen African women's coordinated attempt to kill themselves by jumping overboard as the loss of valuable cargo:

"On the 23rd of March last, fourteen black women apparently leaped overboard, from the poop deck into the sea, all together and in one movement... Despite all possible diligence, with the sea extremely choppy and the wind blowing a gale, sharks had already eaten several of them before any could be hauled back on board, yet seven were saved, one of whom died that evening at seven o'clock, being in very bad shape when rescued, so in the end, eight were lost in this incident.

— Excerpt from the logbook of Louis Mosnier, captain of the slave ship *Le Soleil*" (Kanor 7)

Haunted by this anecdote and these women, Kanor unfruitfully searched for information on these women, for details and evidence about their lived experiences and their complex identities, before filling in this lack herself by imagining and authoring each of their stories (Kanor, *Poétique de la cale* 98). In *Humus*, Kanor masterfully restores the particularity of each woman by

presenting each of their narratives, both entangled and independent of each other, and in doing so, imagines full identities that refuse to be stereotyped as consummate victims, passive spectators, and/or irredeemable villains.

Despite its origin in her own imagination, despite the fact that she "wasn't there," Kanor claims that these stories are "familiar and familial" because "any one of us could have been there, so universal are the ordeals" (9). Kanor also unsettles the stability and boundaries of genre:

"Humus [can be] classified as a novel but that can be read... as a tale of a quest and an abyss, and as an attempt to return home, in defiance of the limits of language, of history, of memory, and of a book as a material space."³ (Kanor, *Poétique de la cale* 98)

According to Kanor's alternate cosmology of genre, these stories could be history, might as well be history, for their universality and their plausibility—more importantly, however, she questions the utility of history and facticity as frames that cannot adequately encompass these stories. Furthermore, she draws attention to history as a narrative itself, instead of an immutable structure; *Humus* is history, and all history is just a collection of stories, told by someone, she tells us.

³ Translation my own. Original: "Seize ans se sont écoulés depuis la publication d'*Humus*, classé comme roman mais qui peut être lu, si on cabote entre les lignes, comme un récit de la quête et de la lacune, et une tentative de rentrer chez soi, au mépris des limites de la langue, de l'histoire, de la mémoire, et du livre comme espace matériel." (Kanor, *Poétique de la cale* 98)

In her theoretical work *Poétique de la cale*, Kanor reveals more about her experience of discovery and haunting that "began on the island of Gorée"⁴ (98). At an exhibition on Gorée, which was the largest slave-trading outpost on the African coast and one of the first sites of European invasion in Western Africa, Kanor found "the story of fourteen African captives who 'altogether and at the same time, in a single movement' 'threw [themselves] from above the deck to the sea'"⁵ (99-100). Kanor searched for more information, for more historical traces of this phantastic act, and came up empty:

"The tragedy of the fourteen rebel women on the slave ship from Nantes, the *Soleil*, comes to a standstill after the dive into the Gulf of Guinea. Their story was the size of a footnote, one example among others of captives' insubordination."⁶ (100)

Kanor provisionally characterizes this anti-genre as "writing projects born from authentic facts"⁷ and retraces the trajectory of the Middle Passage herself, from Nantes to Gorée to the Caribbean, devoting herself to the project of distinguishing these fourteen women from each other, reconstructing them as

⁴ Translation my own. Original: "Tout a commencé sur l'île de Gorée." (Kanor, *Poétique de la cale* 98)

⁵ Translation my own. Original: "L'exposition rapportait notamment l'histoire de quatorze captives africaines qui 'toutes ensemble et dans le même temps, par un seul mouvement' s'étaient 'jetées de dessus la dunette à la mer.'" (Kanor, *Poétique de la cale* 99-100)

⁶ Translation my own. Original: "Mais le drame des quatorze rebelles du navire négrier nantais le *Soleil* s'interrompait juste après le plongeon dans le golfe de Guinée. L'histoire était de la taille d'une note de bas de page, un exemple parmi d'autres de l'insoumission des captifs." (Kanor, *Poétique de la cale* 100)

⁷ Translation my own. Original: "...projets d'écriture enfantés par des faits authentiques..." (Kanor, *Poétique de la cale* 100)

complex, whole beings rather than "symbols" (*des emblèmes*) or "totems" (*des totems*) (104). She also describes the emotional weight of taking on this project, and the ways in which she was haunted by these women:

"I had to force open the hatch of the ghost ship *Soleil* to compose *Humus*. I had imagined the hold so intensely and for so long that it appeared in my writing room, and with it, in its depths, the fourteen women who had refused to die there. In January 2005, I wrote: 'My women haunt me. I am afraid to imagine what my life would be without them.' Truly, I am a believer. I believe that writing is a reminiscence; a dream has come and gone, and then we remember it."⁸ (105)

This passage viscerally relates the new praxis of sensing, imagining, and believing that Kanor experiences as she takes on this project; while she is haunted by "her" women, she does not experience this haunting as an intrusion or an unwelcome demand. Instead, the practice of imagining "so intensely" opens a new realm of sensing and relation, one that is necessary to write the kind of intervention taken on by *Humus*.

In her essay "In Search of a Third Space: Fabienne Kanor's *Humus*," scholar Dominique Aurelia places Kanor in a genealogy of black women writers (many

⁸ Translation my own. Original: "J'avais dû forcer l'écouille du *Soleil* fantôme pour composer *Humus*. J'avais imaginé si fort et si longtemps la cale qu'elle m'était apparue dans ma chambre d'écriture et, avec elle, en son sein, les quatorze femmes qui avaient refusé d'y mourir. En janvier 2005, j'ai écrit : 'Mes femmes me hantent. J'ai peur d'imaginer ce que serait ma vie sans elles.'... De vrai, je suis une croyante. Je crois que l'écriture est une réminiscence ; un rêve est passé et puis on s'en souvient." (Kanor, *Poétique de la cale* 105-107)

of whom make appearances in this work) who use haunting to address history's wounds:

"In using magic as a tool for feminine resistance, Kanor/the one-who-flies reveals herself to be the heiress of Simone Schwarz-Bart, Paule Marshall, Maryse Condé, who display in their novels that which Toni Morrison defines as the concept of 'black cosmogony,' represented by the enrolling of the ghost character who marks, as absent, all those bodies, those anonymous voices, drowned during the Middle Passage or dead during the time of slavery. The ghost, or witch, represents the negation reborn by reactivating memory and subversion. It returns as an irruption of signs that fragments the text, creating a complex space that questions the center. In doing so, the authors promote a cosmogony and an epistemology scorned and obscured by colonialism. New healers, these authors compare and contrast the collective literary memory with the official history: they occupy thus the position of the imaginary but intimate witness." (86-87)

For Aurelia, then, spectral figures refuse erasure by destabilizing narrative itself, disrupting linear storytelling and troubling the boundaries of history and fiction. This kind of haunting challenges the authority of colonial historiography, which renders the enslaved nameless, placeless, and voiceless, by insisting on their return—not as static relics of the past but as active forces of disruption and re-memory. The passage frames Kanor and her literary "ancestors" as "new healers," figures who rewrite history not as a fixed account but as something that must be constantly interrogated, disturbed, and rewritten through the prism of collective memory (86-87).

Crucially, Aurelia insists that these writers do not simply reinsert erased histories into the archive; rather, through their praxis of haunting they create a

“complex space that questions the center” (87). This is a fundamental shift. It is not enough to make room for lost voices within an existing structure; the very structure must be undone. The ghost (and the witch), as figures of disorder and resistance, do not assimilate into dominant historical narratives—they upend them, and they demand a reorientation of knowledge, a recognition that colonial archives are not merely incomplete but fundamentally incapable of accounting for the totality of black experience. In positioning these authors as “intimate witnesses,” Aurelia draws attention to the reinvention of the gaze in and by these literary interventions. The relationship between fiction and history in these works is not distanced or objective; it is not the sterile pose or the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator; it is embodied, felt, and lived. These narratives do not merely recount the past; they invoke it, conjure it, demand that the reader sit with its unresolved presence. The intimacy of witnessing here is not about passive observation but about active participation in the act of memory-making, in the refusal to forget.

Kanor recalls this praxis at the beginning of *Poétique de la cale*, when she describes her methods and organization for this theoretical work:

"One does not chase away ghosts with science, I had told myself. I will not chase the Specter or the missing from the hold. I will let them enter as I

always have, as I do when I await my characters and re-transcribe their epics."⁹ (19)

Here, Kanor eschews the Western strategies of exorcism, dispossession, and banishment in approaching the dead; instead, she details a practice of invitation and active listening, of being-with-the-specter as a decolonial and/or de-historical approach to writing about history's forgotten ghosts. Written in a different context, by different women of the same vocation, Kanor's dual experience of discovery and haunting reveals the shared praxis and project between all these writerly women, a project that sociologist Avery F. Gordon calls ghost stories. This assemblage of haunting advances a decolonial theory and experience of history from a uniquely black Atlantic experience.

In "Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination," Gordon develops the praxis of haunting as a sociological lens through which to read and to interpret history and literature (and everything in between). Haunting, for Gordon, is evidence of the afterlives of trauma and attends to its traces that are invisible and yet palpable. She develops her concept of ghost stories using iconic novelist Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a launching point:

"Toni Morrison's (1989) argument that 'invisible things are not necessarily not-there' encourages the complementary gesture of investigating how

⁹ Translation my own. Original : "On ne chasse pas les fantômes avec la science, avais-je à par moi formulé. Je ne chasserai par le Spectre et les disparus de la cale. Je les laisserai entrer comme je l'ai toujours fait, comme je fais lorsque j'espère mes personnages et retranscris leurs épopées." (Kanor, *Poétique de la cale* 19)

that which appears absent can indeed be a seething presence. Both these positions are about how to write ghost stories — about how to write about permissions and prohibitions, presence and absence, about apparitions and hysterical blindness. *To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories.* To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects. To impute a kind of objectivity to ghosts implies that, from certain standpoints, the dialectics of visibility and invisibility involve a constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows... *If the ghost is a crucible for political mediation and historical memory, the ghost story has no other choice than to refuse the logic of the unreconstructed spectacle, whether of the modern or postmodern variety.*"¹⁰ (17-18)

While Gordon's formulations are evocative and convincing, especially in the context of North American black theory and literature, I argue that this theory of haunting both resonates with and falters in the face of "writing projects born from authentic facts" (Kanor, *Poétique* 100). In the cases of Agnant, Trouillot, Kanor, and others, they are confronted with the undeniable "presence" of "that which appears absent"; they are irrefutably compelled "write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities... that refuse the logic of the unreconstructed spectacle, whether of the modern or postmodern variety" (Gordon 17-18). It would be easy to call these writing projects, haunted as they are by history, ghost stories. However, in this work, Gordon asks unresolved questions and creates openings to which this corpus responds in ways outside the scope of her book:

¹⁰ Emphasis my own.

"Whatever can be said definitively about the long and varied traditions of African-American thought, writing, and radicalism, *the social reality of haunting and the presence of ghosts are prominent features. The capacity not only to live with specters, in order to determine what sort of people they were and could be, but also to engage the ghost, heterogeneously but cooperatively, as metaphor, as weapon, as salve, as a fundamental epistemology for living in the vortex of North America.*"¹¹ (151)

Found near the end of her chapter on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Gordon here offers her most capacious description of the relationship between black thought and haunting; in this passage, she recognizes that the "capacity not only to live with specters... but also to engage the ghost... as salve" is a sign of epistemological disobedience (151). However, while ghost-as-metaphor and ghost-as-weapon are recognized throughout her work, evidence and examples of specter-as-salve are mostly absent from *Ghostly Matters*. One might even say that Gordon's work is haunted by the possibilities of a Caribbean perspective, in which a supernatural presence is not always "seething" and is often soothing, apparitions are not only engaged but embraced, ghosts and specters are also known as spirits, and a vortex is also a spiral.

In her chapter on *Beloved*, Gordon begins with an epigraph that summons Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a quote that she adopts and adapts into a refrain throughout this chapter: "Somewhere between the Actual and the

¹¹ Emphasis my own.

Imaginary ghosts might enter without affrighting us" (139). The original quote from *The Scarlet Letter* continues to imagine a scene in the ghost is accepted, embraced, and even expected:

"... somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us. It would be too much in keeping with the scene to excite surprise, were we to look around us and discover a form beloved, but gone hence, now sitting quietly in a streak of this magic moonshine, with an aspect that would make us doubt whether it had return from afar, or had never once stirred from our fireside." (31)

In *Ghostly Matters*, this in-between space, "where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet," is always out-there, an unfulfilled promise and a wistful possibility (31). And yet, upon reading this refrain, haunted by Hawthorne, this in-between space feels "familiar and familial," to borrow Fabienne Kanor's formulation; it can be found another work haunted by Hawthorne—Maryse Condé's *Moi, Tituba*; it is in the experience of women, haunted by history, compelled to story-telling born of authentic facts, writing from their wombs (Kanor and Palermo 9; Kanor, "Silloner..." 69). Put another way, Gordon calls out for representations of ghostly matters in which the ghost is "not just negative... not other or alterity as such, ever [but also] (like *Beloved*) pregnant with unfulfilled possibility" (183). Maryse Condé, and her sisters-in-writing, answer this call from the Caribbean, disrupting North American conventions of haunting and ghosts. Contrary to

Gordon's reading of *Beloved*, these writers do not experience history as "always a site of struggle and contradiction between the living and the ghostly" (Gordon 184). Instead, following Trouillot's designation of history as "something living" (*quelque chose de vivant*), they instead re-inscribe "history" by living, dreaming, imagining, and inventing worlds in which the living and the ghostly are not distinct, not binary, and not in conflict with each other (Joseph-Gabriel, "'Tant de silence..." 90).

spooking the spectral

In *Moi, Tituba*, Condé offers the ghostly figure of Hester¹², here a radical feminist, reappropriated from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The mirror foil of Tituba, Hester too begins her story in the "bowels" of a ship, traversing the Atlantic for the colonies; a source of solidarity and sisterhood for Tituba, these two women at the margins of society soon bond over their shared practice of infanticide. Hester quickly confides in Tituba that "the number of potions, concoctions, purges, and laxatives I took during my pregnancies helped [her]" to murder her children, and Tituba reciprocates Hester's openness, admitting that "[she], too, killed [her] child" (97). However, when Tituba is taken

¹² The protagonist and anti-heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hester Prynne is imprisoned and then shunned by the Puritan community (famously forced to brand her clothes with a scarlet "A") after getting pregnant out of wedlock.

away for her trial, Hester kills herself, and thus her unborn child, in prison, reminding us, à la Foucault¹³, of the thin lines between the state, the asylum and the prison. However, this death is not the end of Hester's involvement in Tituba's life; Tituba does not just think about Hester, but she speaks to her — "Hester, Hester, you would be angry with me" (140). While this is in no way abnormal for Tituba, who lives with spirits and speaks to her lost loved ones constantly, Hester's appearance and re-appearance (her coming and going) makes clear what the spectral does for Maryse Condé in this work. After Hester's death, Tituba dreams of a ship that brings her joy, rather than despair, and wakes up feeling hopeful. She then shares her first "ghostly" experience with Hester, which is also her first lesbian experience:

"That night Hester lay down beside me, as she did sometimes. I laid my head on the quiet water lily of her cheek and held her tight. Surprisingly, a feeling of pleasure slowly flooded over me. Can you feel pleasure from hugging a body similar to your own?... Was Hester showing me another kind of bodily pleasure?" (122)

¹³ French philosopher Michel Foucault explores the thin lines between the state, asylum, and prison primarily in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), while also touching on these themes in *Society Must Be Defended* (1976) and *Security, Territory, Population* (1977-78 lectures). His work contextualizes how modern institutions—prisons, asylums, and hospitals—are deeply interconnected, forming a network of social control.

In *Moi, Tituba*, Condé carefully constructs that world "between the Actual and the Imaginary [where] ghosts might enter without affrighting us," written by Hawthorne and evoked by Gordon (Hawthorne 31).

In that world, the specter-Hester is her *marasa*, her divine twin, the identification with whom creates a new strand of *relation* that is not conditioned by being-as-Man; recalling Wynter, Tituba here experiences a homogeneity of being that re-writes the symbolic code of life/death by unsettling the "space of otherness" (Wynter, "Unsettling..." 300). As French philosopher Jacques Derrida puts it, this moment of homogeneity writes into existence a "being-with" the spirit that is not "being-with" the other (Derrida and Camuf). This moment, in which Condé writes into being a new praxis of being, is also the moment of desire, recalling Fanon's assertion that the first moment of self-consciousness (as opposed to self-alienation) is the experience of desire:

"...desire [is] is the first stage that leads to the dignity of the mind... I ask that I be taken into consideration on the basis of my desire. I am not only here, locked in thinghood... I pursue something other than life... in other words, a world of reciprocal recognitions." (Fanon, *Black Skin* 224)

This scene, this indelible image of Hester and Tituba laying cheek-to-cheek, is Condé's construction of a "world of reciprocal recognitions," and this illuminates the overlapping valences between Hawthorne and Fanon (224). That ghostly world "where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself

with the nature of the other" is "a world of reciprocal recognitions" (Hawthorne 31; Fanon 224). That dynamic of reciprocity, found in Caribbean literature in the scenes of the spectral, is also an ethical demand for "consciousness witnessing... to create a connectedness and fragmentation of bodies that live/perform/endure the experience of resistance, civic disobedience, citizenship, gender, sexual identity, and ethnicity" (Francis xiv-xv).

This scene is followed by a scene of graphic re-birth, what Tituba calls the "misfortune to be born twice" (122). In this scene, which is or foreshadows perhaps "the joy and happiness" to come from Tituba's dream, Tituba is released from her shackles, yet not freed from slavery, and the violent removal of her shackles causes a painful rush of blood, sensory overload, that she experiences as a rebirth (121). In the wake of the spectral, Condé constructs a scene of birth/re-birth that further unsettles representations of the human by leaning into the aesthetics of the animal and the monstrous:

"I screamed, and this scream, the terrified cry of a newborn baby, heralded my return to this world. I had to learn how to walk again. Deprived of my shackles, I was unable to find my balance and I tottered like a woman drunk on cheap liquor. I had to learn how to speak again, how to communicate with my fellow creatures, and no longer be content with a word here and there. I had to learn how to look them in the eyes again. I had to learn how to do my hair again now that it had become a tangle of untidy snakes hissing around my head. I had to rub ointments on my dry, cracked skin, which had become like a badly tanned hide." (124)

In this scene, Condé emphasizes Fanon's theory from development from self-alienated to self-conscious as an origin story, or scene of birth, and in doing so, she fills in the blanks from *Black Skin, White Masks*, which does not dwell on the likely uncomfortable, disorienting, and painful process of articulating being-as-desire and so fails to imagine this psychological shift as embodied—keeping in mind that the spectral, "this thing that looks at us... [defies] semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as psychology" (Derrida and Camuf). As a result, Tituba "[re-learns] how to look [her fellow creatures] in the eyes again" and is re-cast as Medusa, with a "tangle of untidy snakes hissing around [her] head," whose petrifying gaze disrupts the work of the intruder and the spectator who trespass with violence on their mind (124). To look her fellow creatures in the eyes again is the back-and-forth of a reciprocal gaze that defines representations of the human; it is the affect and aesthetic of the spectral in Caribbean literature.

Gordon is not the first or the last scholar to theorize haunting as a theory and a praxis; the most infamous early example is most likely Jacques Derrida's *Spectres de Marx*¹⁴, and some of the most recent examples include Black Studies

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* (*Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*) contends that Marxism is not dead but continues to "haunt" contemporary society like a ghost—hence the reference to "specters." He deconstructs the idea that we have moved beyond Marx,

writer Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*¹⁵ and lawyer-cum-poet M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*¹⁶ I am arguing that black Atlantic writerly women propose a theory of haunting that unsettles all preexisting work on spectrality, and in doing so, decolonizes the fields of theory and history; echoing Mignolo, the black Atlantic spectral offers a third option, distinct from the binary of life/death. Take Derrida as a launching point. In *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida first introduced his neologism of hauntology (*une hantologie*), a play on ontology and haunting, that suggests existence/being is always overshadowed by the spectral presence of things that no longer exist or have yet to come into being. Ensnared as he was in the closed circuit of European continental philosophy, this work examines how Marxism continues to "haunt" the world after the supposed "end of history" with the fall of the Soviet Union, building off the famous opening line of *The Communist Manifesto*: "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism." While this sociohistorical frame doesn't speak to the work and

arguing that capitalism's contradictions and injustices persist, and therefore, so does the necessity of engaging with Marxist thought.

¹⁵ Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) is a profound meditation on the ongoing afterlives of slavery and the ways in which anti-Blackness structures contemporary existence. Written in the wake of movements like Black Lives Matter, and amid ongoing state violence, police brutality, and systemic racism, the book responds to the persistent conditions of Black suffering and survival.

¹⁶ M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) is a powerful and experimental work that responds to one of the most infamous atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade: the Zong massacre of 1781. Philip, a poet and lawyer, engages with this history by using fragmented, erasure-based poetics to create a text that resists conventional storytelling. She takes the legal decision from the Zong case as her only source text and dismembers, rearranges, and distorts the words, enacting the violence, loss, and silencing imposed by the colonial legal system.

stakes of black Atlantic literature, Derrida's elaboration on the concepts of ghosts, haunting, and mourning offer useful touchstones on which to whet an elaboration of haunting in the black Atlantic, lived and written by the writerly women of this corpus.

In an interview with scholar Annette Joseph-Gabriel, Évelyne Trouillot advances a theory of history as a living being characterized by a vacillating movement, a trajectory that defies teleology and linearity, which are two well-established enunciations of History:

"History is a living thing, and understanding what has happened before allows us to better grasp the present. My historical references... are not points of nostalgia or looking backwards. They are rather attempts to shed new light in order to establish a connection with the present. Thus, history permits us to move forward if we know how to read it, to explore it, to break through the prohibitions and silences, without fearing to question the dominant historical discourse... in my texts for that matter, there is often this back-and-forth movement, as time not being linear, and I enjoy steering the reader through its incessant fluctuations."¹⁷ (90)

Trouillot's elaboration here unfurls a relationship to time that is not linear or progressive, an experience of time as constantly in motion rather than still or stable. This kinetic experience of history and time unsettles the inertia of the

¹⁷ Translation my own. Original: "L'histoire est quelque chose de vivant, et comprendre ce qui s'est passé avant nous permet de mieux saisir le présent. Mes références à l'histoire... ne sont pas des points nostalgiques ou passésistes. Ce sont plutôt des tentatives d'un éclairage nouveau pour faire le lien justement avec le présent. Donc, l'histoire nous permet d'avancer si nous savons la lire, fouiller, briser les interdits et les silences, sans avoir peur de questionner le discours historique dominant... Dans mes textes, il y a d'ailleurs souvent ce mouvement de va- et- vient, le temps n'étant pas linéaire, et cela me plaît d'amener le lecteur à suivre ses incessantes fluctuations." (Joseph-Gabriel, "Tant de silence..." 90)

present and/or our perception of the present as such; haunting "alters the experience of being in time" (Gordon xvi). As Derrida reminds us, this back-and-forth movement ("*ce mouvement de va- et- vient*") is an inherently spectral movement, a rocking that undoubtedly recalls the sickening motion of a slave ship in the ocean (Joseph-Gabriel, "'Tant de silence..." 90). In the first chapter of *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida deconstructs the ghostly aspects of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and establishes the perceived rhythm of the ghost, a repetitive vacillation troubles our perception of the present, playing on the origin of the word revenant from *revenir* (to come back/to return):

"From what could be called the other time, from the other scene, from the eve of the play, the witnesses of history fear and hope for a return, then, 'again' and 'again,' a coming and going... A question of repetition: a specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back."¹⁸

In French, Trouillot and Derrida share a lexicon of coming and going, relying on conjugations of *aller* (to go) and *venir* (to come) to describe this wavering, nuances that are somewhat lost in the English translations.

Trouillot's formulation "*va- et- vient*" plays with the present continuous/present imperfect; despite its appellation as present tense, the present

¹⁸ "Depuis ce qu'on pourrait appeler l'autre temps ou l'autre scène, depuis la veille de la pièce, les témoins de l'histoire redoutent et espèrent un retour, puis, again and again, une allée et venue... Question de répétition : un spectre est toujours un revenant. On ne saurait en contrôler les allées et venues parce qu'il commence par revenir." (Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*)

continuous can describe temporary actions, future plans, and/or actions that aren't yet finished—it is a mobile and fluid tense that reflects Trouillot's understanding of history and the way she constructs history in her own works. Derrida plays similar language games in his work, using the past participles of *aller* and *venir* as nouns (*une allée et venue*), obliquely demonstrating the subtle differences between him and Trouillot, the ways his theory falters in the face of a Caribbean perspective. Past participles in French are almost always accompanied by another auxiliary verb—it is a tense that serves to form other, more complex tenses that are compound or passive. It is impersonal, meaning it does not change to agree with the perspective (1st, 2nd, or 3rd person) or the number (singular or plural) of the subject; interestingly, despite being called the past participle, it is used for future compound tenses as well. To use a past participle as a noun, especially in the case of *aller* and *venir*, is more irregular and unique; it does gesture towards a flexibility of time and language, a past that can be found in the future, while projecting a kind of false stability in the form of a noun.

All this to say, while Derrida's insistence on the motion of the revenant, the back and forth coming and going, reflects the experience of haunting and history that Trouillot and her compatriots share, his work comes from a different perspective, that of a spectator. His observation of coming and going as nouns comes from the objectivity and neutrality of an innocent bystander, an audience

member in a theater, while Trouillot elaborates the perspective from the stage, as an active participant that implicated by this experience of history, and insists on recreating this perspective for the reader, refusing them the gaze of the voyeur or the safety of the spectator ("in my texts for that matter, there is often this back-and-forth movement, as time not being linear, and I enjoy steering the reader through its incessant fluctuations") (Joseph-Gabriel, "'*Tant de silence...*" 90).

Trouillot, Condé, Kanor, Danticat, and the others are not "witnesses of history [fearing] and [hoping] for a return," as Derrida imagines ; rather, they are called upon by history and call history into being (Derrida and Camuf). As Derrida suggests, "haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not *dated*, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, according to the instituted order of a calendar" (Derrida and Camuf). These writers are haunted by history, to be sure, but they are also haunting history themselves.

In their descriptions of being haunted by the women whose absences they exposed, the writers of this corpus encounter a kind of sixth sense, a prickly awareness—the feeling of being-gazed-upon rather than gazing. Condé shares that her feeling that "Tituba would go look at them, read them, and eventually correct what she did not like... All along during my writing of the novel I felt that she was there" (Condé and Philcox 201). In *Poétique de la cale*, Kanor similarly

reflects on this sense of cohabitation with (what Derrida calls "being-with") her ghosts:

"I had to force open the hatch of the ghost ship *Soleil* to compose *Humus*. I had imagined the hold so intensely and for so long that it appeared in my writing room, and with it, in its depths, the fourteen women who had refused to die there." (105)

This sense is a reversal of the traditional historical praxis, which presupposes the gaze of the "expert" onto the "object." As Derrida notes in *Spectres of Marx*, the spectral inverts the gaze of the spectator, invoking the kind of self-reflexivity seen in the hybrid history/fiction texts of the Caribbean. According to Derrida, the specter is "this thing that looks at us [that] comes to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as psychology"¹⁹ (Derrida and Camuf). Building on Mignolo's essential formulations, against the suppression of the senses and the body of the current episteme, haunting and the specter in Caribbean literature produces and is produced by disobedient forms of sensing and knowing; it enunciates a way of being that not only defies ontology but is non-ontological, that is illegible to the Western locus of enunciation (Mignolo, "Geopolitics of sensing and knowing"). Furthermore, it implies the kind of ethical

¹⁹ "Voici – ou voilà, là-bas, une chose innommable ou presque : quelque chose, entre quelque chose et quelqu'un, quiconque ou quelconque, quelque chose, cette chose-ci, « this thing », cette chose pourtant et non une autre, cette chose qui nous regarde vient à défier la sémantique autant que l'ontologie, la psychanalyse autant que l'ontologie." (Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*)

injunction elaborated by Gladys Francis, who recognizes the call for "conscientious witnessing and agency rather than otiose spectatorship" in Caribbean literature (*Odious Caribbean Women* xvi). Similarly, in her work, Gordon reflects that the language and theory of haunting is her proposed method to evoke the "nastiness" of the afterlives of slavery "without either reducing these matters to the epiphenomenal or detaching them from what we conventionally call the political economy" (xvii). For these writerly women of the Caribbean, then, haunting is more than an otherworldly experience; it is a praxis of imagining history through embodiment and an ethical engagement with epistemic violence in the face of History's erasures, absences, and silences.

Aimé Césaire's famous warning haunts this ethical injunction to which these writers gesture:

"This above all, my body and my soul: beware of crossing your arms in the sterile pose of a spectator, for life is not a [spectacle], for a sea of troubles is not a proscenium, for a screaming human being is not a dancing bear..." (95)

The questions of the spectacle and the spectator recur throughout the black Atlantic archive, arguably beginning with Civil Rights leader Frederick Douglass' record of the "terrible spectacle" of the beating of Aunt Hester that initiated his self-regard as slave, a baton that Saidiya Hartman picks up in *Scenes of Subjection* (1). In *The Black Reproductive*, feminist writer Sara Clarke Kaplan

further reminds us that "the racial sexual grammar of slavery... operated through public spectacles... [and] intimate violence" (93). Writers of the black Atlantic have to reckon with and counteract this coerced and omnipresent spectatorship, through different inflections of the gaze and the voice.

In *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida reflects that because "we do not see who sees us," we depend on their voice, and yet, he problematizes the possibility of a dialogue between this imagined "we" and the spectral:

"What seems almost impossible is to speak always of the specter, to speak to the specter, to speak with it, therefore especially to make or to let a spirit speak. And the thing seems even more difficult for a reader, an expert, a professor, an interpreter, in short, for what Marcellus calls a 'scholar.' Perhaps for a spectator in general."

In this passage, Derrida expresses the difficulty of hearing the specter when one is mired in the roles of scholar or spectator, hinting at the overlap between the two, and isolates "letting a spirit speak" as perhaps the most essential and difficult task. Yet, in the experiences of haunting shared by writers of the black Atlantic, they practice conscientious witness rather than spectatorship, through and because of a different staging of speaking. In the case of Toni Morrison, Gordon argues that "Morrison does not speak for [Margaret Garner]. She imagines [her] speaking [her] complex personhood as it negotiates the always coercive and subtle complexities of the hands of power" (150). This description of the relationship between writer and historical subject is shared throughout the

corpus assembled here, of writerly women refusing to speak *for* their specters, which would be the practice exercised by Derrida's spectator-scholars.

The experience of haunting in this context permits another kind of back-and-forth, coming and going, motion—that of a dialogue, a call and response between beings whose being-together overcomes differences in being. "Tituba and I lived for a year on the closest of terms. During our endless conversations she told me things she had confided to nobody else" (Condé v). It only through this praxis of haunting that Condé is enabled to "address" Tituba, to speak with the spectator, and most importantly, let the spirit speak, as Derrida puts it. I repeat, this praxis reveals a way of being that is de-ontological—what Derrida dreams of as "being-with". In theorist Zakiyyah Jackson's framework, the identification with/as the spectral "[questions]... the virtuousness of human recognition... [developing] a praxis of being that is not only an alternative to the necropolitical but opposes it" (18). Jackson's framework perfectly encapsulates what distinguishes a Caribbean perspective of haunting from a Western one. For scholars such as Derrida and Gordon, the theory of haunting is a useful tool for navigating the necropolitics of the slave episteme, a praxis that almost functions through negation. While this perspective is pertinent and necessary, Derrida and Gordon's works are themselves haunted by a desire for a relation to ghosts and haunting that is not always in relation to death; for that world where ghosts can

"enter without affrighting," (Gordon 139) where "being-with" ghosts is oriented "not towards death but living-on" (Derrida and Camuf).

I'd like to pause for a moment to collect these moments of wistful dreaming enunciated by Hawthorne, Derrida and Gordon, theoretical slips of the tongue that call out to the Caribbean.

"... somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us. It would be too much in keeping with the scene to excite surprise, were we to look around us and discover a form beloved, but gone hence, now sitting quietly in a streak of this magic moonshine, with an aspect that would make us doubt whether it had return from afar, or had never once stirred from our fireside." (Hawthorne 31)

"Somewhere between the Actual and the Imaginary ghosts might enter without affrighting us. Or at least without scaring us so much that we take off running, away from the reckoning, but still without adequate preparation, into the tangle of the historical fault lines that remain." (Gordon 139)

"... the social reality of haunting and the presence of ghosts are prominent features. The capacity not only to live with specters, in order to determine what sort of people they were and could be, but also to engage the ghost, heterogeneously but cooperatively, as metaphor, as weapon, as salve, as a fundamental epistemology for living..." (Gordon 151)

"Only when the horror of annihilation is raised fully into consciousness are we placed in proper relationship to the dead: that of unity with them, since we, like them, are victims of the same conditions and the same disappointed hope." (Horkheimer and Adorno 178)

"If it—learning to live—remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death alone. What happens between two, and between all the 'two's' one likes, such as between life and death,

can only maintain itself with some ghost, can only talk with or about some ghost... The time of the 'learning to live,' a time without tutelary present, would amount to this, to which the exordium is leading us: to learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But with them. No being-with the other, no socius without this with that makes being-with in general more enigmatic than ever for us. And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations." (Derrida and Camuf)

The ensemble of these quotes brings to mind any number of scenes from the black Atlantic, in which spirits are welcomed, without fear—where we live with specters. The ghost of the Arada midwife who haunts Évelyne Trouillot, whose presence only retreated to return with better grip (*ce mouvement de va-et-vient*), does so with "[tranquil] resolution" (131). In *Poétique de la cale*, Fabienne Kanor reveals "[she is] afraid to imagine what [her] life would be without [the women of *Le Soleil*]" (105). These ghosts are not impositions or obtrusive, but evidence of a being-with specters. In *Moi, Tituba*, Tituba is welcomed back to her island, Barbados, by an "invisible trio" who are described with acute visual details: "Mama Yaya, the tall Nago Negress with sparkling teeth, Abena, my mother, the Ashanti princess with her jet-black skin and ritual scarifications. Yao, the silk-cotton tree with large, powerful feet" (141). This trio embraces her, and her feelings—of recognition, love, sorrow—are indescribable to her. Tituba, who

becomes a spirit herself, reflects that her *real* story, her *real* life, started with her spectral existence.

But the scene that flashes before my eyes when imagining the world between the Actual and the Imaginary takes place in Évelyne Trouillot's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*. After crossing the bridge of beyond, Télumée lives in a different plane of existence and encounters new ways of being. Her grandmother, Queen Without a Name, takes her to meet Ma(n) Cia, the local witch, and as these three women sit around a fire eating dinner, they share a meal with Télumée's much beloved, yet lost, grandfather, Jeremiah:

"And she sat down abruptly with a bitter laugh, and some gravy spilled out of the bowl and onto the ground. 'Oh,' said Ma Cia. 'So the dead are served first now, are they?' 'You know Jeremiah always had a weakness for stewed pork,' said Grandmother, smiling. 'And how is he?' asked Ma Cia gravely. 'He hasn't forgotten me,' said Grandmother happily. 'He comes to see me every night without fail. And he hasn't changed, he's just the same as when he was alive.'
'But is he well?' said her friend. 'He's very well,' answered Grandmother gravely." (53)

This scene is the unrealized dream of Hawthorne, Derrida, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Gordon. That in-between world, between the Actual and the Imaginary, is across the bridge of Beyond, and there, the dead enter without surprise or fear. This meal shared around a fire is Derrida's subjunctive dream of a "being-with specters [that] would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations" (Derrida and Camuf). In the spectral world of

the Caribbean, the dead (living or otherwise) are not spectacles and so do not provoke the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator; recognized for their own desires and well-beings that are taken seriously ("'He's very well,' answered Grandmother gravely"), they are a constant, almost mundane presence that unsettles the present and that invokes a politics of both care and memory (Schwarz-Bart 53). In truth, the ensemble of the above citations, stitched together like verses of a polyphonic poem, reveal the necessity of a black Atlantic hauntology, a theory of haunting in which the embrace of the ghostly activates new ontological and non-ontological possibilities, develops a new praxis of being (as called for by Sylvia Wynter), and unlocks an ethical injunction.

towards a black atlantic hauntology

In *Le Livre d'Emma*, poet laureate Marie-Célie Agnant tangibly reconstructs this in-between space, in which ghosts are welcomed without fear and offer an epistemological challenge to the blood-logics of the slave episteme. In this book, the titular protagonist Emma faces a series of institutionalized obstacles to her attempts to record and impart the collective memory of slavery in Haiti. The story begins with Emma's literal institutionalization in a mental hospital in Canada after being accused of killing her baby. Although she speaks perfect French, Emma refuses to speak to the doctor — preferring instead to converse with a young interpreter, Flore, in their mother tongue of Haitian

Creole. Taking Flore with her on the winding path through Emma's life, she (Emma) recounts that she wrote an official thesis on the history of slavery in Haiti twice—once in France, once in Montreal—only to be denied each time. This second rejection took place just before the alleged murder of her child, Lola. Emma's tragic trajectory suggests that, faced with the institutionalization of silence about the slave trade, which is reflected in turn by her own institutionalization, Emma is driven to the unimaginable revocation of her maternal role and responsibility—infanticide—in turn interpreted as madness by the various colonial institutions to which she is subject.

Agnant depicts Emma's tragic life as the culmination of a matrilineal curse that began with their first enslaved ancestor, Kilima. The genealogy of this curse is delivered in reverse chronological order through Emma's testimony to Flore, in which she shares the stories that had been shared with her, an intergenerational transmission of memory, by her cousin Mattie, a quasi-maternal figure. During the story of Emma's grandmother, Rosa, Agnant vividly constructs a scene of haunting that heals:

"Then—as she told me—one night three women came to visit her [Rosa]. They were Cécile, the eternal maroon, Béa, Baptiste's mother, and Kilima, the first of her lineage: in other words, the first one of all our ancestors to arrive on the island.'

'Where did all those women come from, Mattie? Hadn't they been dead for centuries?' I asked her pointedly.

'Mattie never said of the women who had made the big voyage that they were dead, but that they had fallen down; a way of saying that she didn't accept their absence or their defeat, because, for Mattie, a woman was a warrior. A warrior doesn't die. She has the duty to pick herself up in order to continue the fight. Mattie had an impressive repertoire of tales in which a woman warrior always gets back up and, in order to walk, borrows the feet and legs of those being born...

In a paling fence, the new poles always lean against the old ones,' Mattie continued, so that I would understand that we black women, when we die, we can't go away forever. 'We don't have that right,' she would say, 'since those who remain behind are still in need of us. Don't you know that on the ships, we held hands to throw ourselves into the waves and avoid the chains?'...

'Those women formed a circle around Rosa. All three wore sparkling white garments. Their snowy hair made lilac-coloured halos around their faces. It was both strange and beautiful, your grandmother told me. She hadn't been afraid. She asked them very simply what they were doing there. "You must know why we have come," Kilima answered her. They were in the middle of the ocean. Behind them was the outline of the tall mountains, La Selle and Les Gabions. One after the other, they sprinkled your grandmother with water and said to her: 'A black woman who lets them take all of her soul isn't a black woman, Rosa. She's a prostrate woman! Pick yourself up! That's our request! What energy will you have for the voyage back to Guinea? Do you know how many crossroads you still have to negotiate? It's impossible to count them. 'Pick yourself up, Rosa Guinea,' they order her again. 'We are not in the habit of coming to look for those women who allow life to dispossess them of their souls.'" (149-151)

In this scene, Rosa is visited by three maternal ancestors, only one of which is actually biologically related to her (Kilima), and she "wasn't afraid" (150).

Instead, she asks why they have come to her, and they in turn offer purification, strength and motivation—in the form of tough love—to Rosa at the height of her tormented life, having been abandoned by her husband and daughters. In their

advice, their words reverse the instinctual logic of life and death; Rosa, ostensibly the "living" woman in this encounter, is re-cast as the spirit who has been "[dispossessed] of [her soul], and her deathly ancestors are alternately more alive, in full possession of their souls (151). This reading is reinforced by Mattie's lessons, which offer a guide through which to understand Rosa's supernatural encounter. According to Mattie, to accept the terms, the grammar, of life and death is to accept a false binary of victory or defeat, and presence or absence, which is counter to the experience of memory in the black Atlantic (149). After this visit, Rosa seemingly overcomes the curse of suffering that plagued their lineage; instead, she "gave to the ocean... that immense distress that she had carried along with her everywhere" (152). While Agnant's work testifies to the wounded maternity that structured the slave episteme, this wounding always appears in concert with other possibilities of maternal *relation*, made possible in the absence of biological kinship and the symbolic code of life and death that reign. In the black Atlantic, haunting challenges the bio- and blood-logics of the slave episteme; moreover, haunting is more than an aesthetic or a theme—the experience of haunting and the presence of spirits are part and parcel of a distinctly black Atlantic praxis of being(-with) that unsettles Western epistemology and ontology. Haunting challenges the *bios/mythoi* origin stories of the episteme, as revealed by Wynter, and offers another way.

In "A Caribbean Hauntology: The Sensorial Art of Joscelyn Gardner et M. NourbeSe Philip," literature and art critic Guillermina De Ferrari begins this wake work, the conjuring of a Caribbean hauntology that unsettles other Western enunciations of haunting. De Ferrari reads the ghostly presences in Gardner and Philip's respective works as "sensorial glitches," tracing the way Caribbean artists create "carefully calibrated tension" by layering contradictory and incompatible sensory perspectives (275, 277). According to her framework, "'the spectral' is a dislocated synesthesia" that disorients, and that disorientation "creates an ontological uncertainty" (277, 287). Echoing, to a certain extent, the work of Gordon and Derrida, de Ferrari argues "While the incongruous sensorial experience is disorienting, the call for justice is certain. Indeed... the more disorienting the former, the clearer the latter" (287). By working with Gardner's works, which are art installations, de Ferrari makes clear the role of the would-be spectator in a Caribbean hauntology; the disorienting spectral conjured by Caribbean implicates the audience, turning their own senses against them in their quest for perception:

"The spectators' senses perceive the black bodies, but, because they are translucent (as if black bodies were made of a matter less solid), the senses simultaneously undermine the black women's presence... These perceptions conflict. They do not align in a coherent manner, thus thwarting comprehension. In witnessing this piece, the spectator's senses for the most part disavow each other." (277)

"The dark room and the vivid projection enhance the sense of proximity, making the spectator feel that she is indeed at the edge of the water or on the deck of the slave ship. The absence of the bodies whose voices she hears interpellates her. They are invisible, but they are there, they are drowning, and she is letting it happen. The spectator is no longer an innocent bystander." (280)

The implication of the spectator, here through sensory disorientation, is a distinctly Caribbean expression of the spectral, and as de Ferrari clarifies, it produces an ethical demand. As such, de Ferrari's work fits into the Wynter-ian demand to unsettle the episteme. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, to unsettle is to disorient, and de Ferrari's insistence on the dislocated, incoherent, glitchy mirrors my own investment in Caribbean unsettling as characterized by an aesthetic unwellness, as we have seen in the odious, the monstrous, and the necropolitical. In the context of the Caribbean, haunting is a neither a historical nor anti-historical praxis, but a de-historical praxis that de-links both epistemologically and ontologically from the coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.

In "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," poet and critic Nathaniel Mackey further advances a theory of wounded kinship and phantom limb that extends this elaboration of a Caribbean theory of haunting as de-historical. Mackey takes up haunting as that collocation of immanence and transcendence needed to simultaneously critique reality while imagining other possibilities—as

he puts it, "the social isn't all of it. One needs to hear... a simultaneous mystic thrust" (32). Expanding on the figure of the phantom limb from his work *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, Mackey's evocation of haunting also gestures at the palliative dimensions of the spectral in Caribbean literature:

"For now, let me simply say that the phantom limb is a felt recovery, a felt advance beyond severance and limitation which contends with and questions conventional reality, that it's a feeling for what's not there which reaches beyond as it calls into question what is." (32)

Riffing off Legba's limp²⁰ as a kind of a phantom limb, Mackey reads the repeated instances of haunting and the spectral as not only signifiers of pain and trauma, but also of healing and restoration; in his framework, "phantom limbs mend amputation" (49). Similarly, in his work *Discrepant Engagement*, Mackey reads haunting in Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris' oeuvre²¹ as an intervention in the field of history:

"Mackey writes of Harris's attempt 'to free the Caribbean of a reductionist historiography' through his 'spectral or phantom remembering of a dismembered past' (165) that allows for 'the possibility of fulfillment in the midst of presumed and even manifest deprivation' (169)." (Heuving 207)

²⁰ Legba is a central figure in Haitian Vodou, Louisiana Voodoo, and other Afro-Caribbean spiritual traditions derived from West African religious systems, particularly the Fon and Yoruba peoples' belief systems. He is often known as Papa Legba and serves as the guardian of the crossroads, the opener of doors, and the intermediary between humans and the spirits (lwa or orishas). Legba is often depicted as an elderly man with a cane or walking stick, and sometimes with a limp.

²¹ Wilson Harris (1921–2018) was a Guyanese writer renowned for his richly complex and innovative literary works that blend myth, history, and philosophy. Throughout his career, Harris received numerous accolades, including the Guyana Prize for Literature and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. He was knighted in 2010 for his contributions to literature. Harris's work continues to be studied for its unique fusion of myth and reality, offering profound insights into the human condition and the Caribbean experience.

Mackey continues this line of inquiry in "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," when he offers the striking image of a limping Legba to conjure an off-tempo rhythm. This off-tempo rhythm is also, according to Mackey, "an 'offbeat' sense of history [that diverges] from the... doctrine of history as monolithic advance" (41). For Caribbean writers, haunting is thus an aesthetic and a praxis, a disruptive, off-beat method of engagement with History that unsettles the colonial perception of time. In an interview with Gladys Francis, Fabienne Kanor also relies on this taxonomy of sickness and healing to describe her relationship as a writer to History, reflecting that "[she] is very sick. My history hurts and to rewrite it is the only method that I have found to heal a little"²² (Francis, "Entretien avec Fabienne Kanor" 277). Like Mackey, Kanor offers a tangible, embodied metaphor of illness to describe her manner of doing history—of haunting history while being haunted by its victims, by its silences and absences:

"...invited on a TV show in Martinique, I asserted that I write with my womb. I should have added 'with my mind as well,' but I no doubt wanted to remind my audience that women's wombs have not only been for bearing children, that anger, madness, cruelty, chaos, solitude, and hunger also reign in those wombs... all that is used for writing books." ("Sillonner..." 69)

²² Translation my own. Original: "Je suis une grande malade. J'ai mal à mon histoire et la réécrire est le seul moyen que j'ai trouvé pour guérir un peu." (Francis, "Entretien avec Fabienne Kanor" 277)

This practice of healing, through writing history, is written from the space of de-biologized womb; it announces a politics of revolt and care made possible through the unsettling of slavery's biologics.

Haunting as care and as remedy appears at the end of Marie-Célie Agnant's *Le Livre d'Emma*, when Emma's ghostly body appears over Flore's as she has sex with Nickolas, Emma's lover. In this scene, haunting unsettles history, and the legacies of reproductive alienation, by re-making Flore's being-in-the-world:

"... the voice of Emma whispered: 'They have always taught us that love, like everything is good on this earth, wasn't made for us.'
Emma. Wasn't she there, guiding over my body the body of that man, guiding me, one of the new to have patiently learned her language? Yes, I told myself, Emma is bringing me into the world; she is reinventing my birth. She is there to lead her last fight and to defeat destiny, through me. The bed, was it a ship, a slave ship? ... Emma's eyes, glued to me, told me the contrary: 'breathe in his scent with pleasure; learn to nest in the curve of his arm, to let your body be impregnated with the memory of that swell: quite simply, learn that you are first a woman and then a black woman.'" (202-203)

Like the appearances of Yao, Mama Yaya, and Abena to Tituba, like the appearance of Jeremiah to Queen without a Name, Emma's appearance is an accepted, welcome presence that offers remediation of the "curse on [their] blood that ran under [Flore's] skin and deep down in [her] pupils made to fool the night" (202). As Mackey reveals, "[the] phantom... haunts or critiques a condition in which feeling, consciousness itself, would seem to have been cut off..." (32). It

is thus only in the presence of Emma's absence that Flore is able to re-imagine the wounded kinship and reproductive alienation that are slavery's defining logics; the specter of Emma destabilizes the biologics of birth, sex, and impregnation, "defeating destiny," by asserting love and desire into the scene of reproduction *and* by performing a gaze that is neither voyeur nor spectator (202). In her interview with Francis, Fabienne Kanor mirrored the words that Emma shares with Flore in this scene:

"FK: Being a woman learning to love your man... Loving a man, loving your man, doesn't come naturally for many women. In my home, in my family, and in my culture, girls are taught the opposite. Mothers instill mistrust and fear — 'He will leave you for someone else,' 'He will cheat on you,' "He will abandon you" — which are very common refrains. Being a woman in front of a man means learning to deconstruct these pre-made, contrived narratives in order to freely engage in an encounter; it means understanding that a man is not the same as 'men' in general, and that a relationship is something that is built." (Francis, "Entretien avec Fabienne Kanor" 278)

In this scene, Emma and Flore reverse the "familiar and familial" discourses of womanhood and motherhood that reinforced the kinlessness²³ of enslaved people and their descendants (Kanor and Palermo 9). Emma-as-specter gives

²³ The argument that slavery is kinlessness is most prominently articulated by Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death*, Claude Meillassoux in *The Anthropology of Slavery*, and Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." This theory posits that the core of slavery is not just forced labor or physical subjugation, but a radical form of social alienation—the severing of enslaved people from family, ancestry, and broader social networks. In this view, slavery is fundamentally about natal alienation, meaning that the enslaved are denied the ability to claim or transmit kinship ties.

birth anew to Flore, re-becoming mother through the performance of reproduction without the intrusions of flesh or biocapitalism. In this dynamic, the descendent of the enslaved is no longer mother- or kin-less, and the infanticidal mother seems to have healed her relationship with maternal desire by de-biologizing and decolonizing the womb, by dissecting the maternal from desire.

If Flore is re-born through Emma's ghostly guidance, then she re-emerges into the world as neither Man1 or Man2, but a wholly new, and new whole, representation of human being, one defined by languaging and loving (Romesin and Verden-Zöllner). This being-with is not defined by the space of otherness as race—she "[learns] that [she] first a woman and *then* a black woman" (203). Furthermore, she is not biologically or discursively pre-defined as a reproductive labor—instead, she is "impregnated" with memory, forging a new path of kinship and *relation* between the two of them that is neither biological nor economic. Recalling Fanon's assertion that asserting one's desire is the first stage of self-consciousness and Kanor's insistence that the taboo on women's pleasure re-enslaves the woman and her body, Emma's guidance to Flore to allow herself the pleasure of the moment frees Flore from the chains of self- and reproductive-alienation (Francis, "Entretien" 279-280). This haunting and haunted scene stages the "meeting of transcendence and immanence" imagined by Mackey, in which

the social *and* the metaphysical work together to interpolate a politics of care and memory (30).

3. weaponizing the womb

“Manjé tè, pa fè yiche pou lesclavaj.”
(Eat dirt; don’t make children for slavery)
— Édouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais*

*“May I find the courage to honor my promise:
Creole child who still lives in me,
you will be born free and rebellious,
or you will not be born at all”*
— Évelyne Trouillot, *Rosalie l'infâme*

Perhaps the most infamous example of the womb wielded as a weapon in the black Atlantic archive comes from Évelyne Trouillot's *Rosalie, l'infâme*, in the form of the fierce Arada midwife who "kept a cord of some seventy knots, each one marking a child she killed at birth" (Abenon and Cauna). The most important, and damning, story entrusted to Lisette is withheld until the crescendo of this work, when Lisette must make a choice about her own unborn child—the tale of Brigitte, a woman spoken about in whispers and shadows, a lost aunt shrouded in secrecy, the midwife who murdered seventy infants to "[release] 'these young creatures from this shameful condition called slavery'" (120). In Trouillot's hands, Brigitte is an otherworldly force of nature, the very essence of revolt incarnate. From the moment she was captured, she was "deemed dangerous," and her sisters reflect that they should have known that Brigitte would not take the captivity of her and her loves ones passively (27). Augustine shares with Lisette that Brigitte was "[salt] of the earth, proud and

generous, solid and tough like a *mapou*... [she] was created to be free" (119). Her reputation is larger-than-life and supernatural, not unlike the Maroon marauder, Makandal, "[a] Mandingo sorcerer with power and courage... who inspires rebellion" (51).

Brigitte, whose very name is a formidable talisman against the despair of powerlessness, "knew the secrets of herbs, plants, and the human body. She could heal, but she could also injure" (116). The "threat of death in [her] eyes" could cause a colonist to concede, and yet her voice also restored "strength and dignity" to her loved ones in the aftermath of the Middle Passage (116, 11). Even the exact end of Brigitte's story is kept ambiguous, as Augustine concludes with an account of Brigitte's testimony before the constabulary instead of the outcome of the trial:

"She never regretted what she did. Charitable was the one who relayed her last words. She declared to the judges that it was her duty as a Negress free of mind and soul to release 'these young creatures from this shameful condition called slavery.' When they asked her why she had decided not to keep on doing so, she replied: 'Since I don't have the courage to do it for my own blood, I can no longer do it for others. I've already chased from my own body three times a baby who only would have shared my humiliation had I given birth, but I couldn't risk making my niece cry. The cord is no longer in my possession, but I can promise you that it has seventy knots, one for each baby that I saved from slavery. Today my work is finished. Do with me as you will.'" (120)

The indomitable Brigitte, recognizing how reproduction has been weaponized against her and her people, made the seemingly inconceivable choice to

weaponize her own knowledge and her trusted position as midwife—to deliver unto death instead of life. Yet, in the context of Trouillot's painstaking attention to the everyday lives of enslaved people in Saint Domingue, Brigitte's thought process becomes damningly demystified and heartbreakingly conceivable. It's reflected in small moments sprinkled throughout the pages of *Rosalie, l'infâme*, and it challenges the reader to the limits of empathy. Can we empathize with a murderer? Can we bear witnessing violence against children, a nearly universal taboo, as a means of revolt and even of care, without stigmatizing, diagnosing, or redeeming these monstrous mothers?

As seen in Trouillot's *Rosalie, l'infâme*, black Atlantic writerly women reveal and problematize the paradox of maternity for enslaved peoples: reproduction that had been ripped from every sense of kinship and has been reduced instead to a bio-capitalist equation. In the wake of this mutilation, in which the womb is disfigured into a generator of human capital, the significance of maternity is always liminal, caught in between competing urges, between progenitor and generator. In these works, monstrous mothers and witchy women refuse the complicit “motherhood” that is propped up by the plantation system and the slave episteme. For these women, infanticide is a refusal of maternity and a revolutionary act—a biopolitical challenge to the death-world of the black Atlantic. In this chapter, I argue that, in black Atlantic literature,

infanticide and self-induced abortion are acts both of resistance and of radical care against racialized biocapitalism. Thus, infanticide constitutes an act of necroresistance to complicit black maternity in the wake of the Middle Passage, and the womb constitutes a literal, material technology of death in the slave episteme. The archive of the black Atlantic, from oral folklore to contemporary literature, relies on a tangible aesthetic of the odious and the monstrous to insist on the *material repercussions* of the abstracted and exploited womb, of which *patrus sequitur ventrem* is the epitome – and yet, these women also resist and reappropriate the necropolitical into a politics of care, for their ancestors, themselves, and their denied progeny. They reinvent the symbolism that encumbers the figure of the mother and construct a new grammar, by weaponizing the womb.

representing and resisting abjection

““The nightmares. I thought they would fade with age, but no, it’s like getting raped every night. I can’t keep this baby.”

“It must have been much harder then but you kept me.”

“When I was pregnant with you, Manman made me drink all kinds of herbs, vervain, quinine, and verbena, baby poisons. I tried beating my stomach with wooden spoons. I tried to destroy you, but you wouldn’t go away.”

She reached over and handed Brigitte back to me.

“When I was carrying you, you were brave,” she said. “You wanted to live. You wanted to taste salt, as my mother would say. You were going to kill me before I killed you.””

(Danticat 193)

This graphic conversation between mother and daughter takes place at the climax of wordsmith Edwidge Danticat's work *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, right before the speaker, Martine, kills herself during a self-administered abortion attempt. In this passage, Martine reveals to her daughter Sophie, the product of teenage Martine's rape, that she never intended to keep her once she found she was pregnant. Instead, she lists the ways she and her mother, Ifé, attempted to abort the pregnancy—while Ifé's attempts were based in local Haitian practices, Martine's attempts escalated to extreme violence and self-harm. Earlier, we learned that Martine went "half-mad" while she was pregnant with Sophie, plagued with nightmares during which "she tore her sheets and bit off pieces of her own flesh." Clearly, the stakes of maternity for Martine reach far beyond the usual concerns (such as the ability to care for a child)—even in the womb, Sophie is already a person, one whose survival comes at the cost of Martine's. They are two people inhabiting one body—a body that only has space for one, in Martine's mind. Martine ascribes her failure to abort as the result of Sophie's taste for salt (i.e. her drive for life and for freedom), like a zombie regaining their own consciousness in Vodou lore. These confessions offered by a mother to her daughter both present and complicate the idea of maternal abjection, here through self-harm and infanticide.

Turning for a moment to the infamous work *Powers of Horror*, philosopher Julia Kristeva describes the abject as a "violent, dark revolt of being," a force that "lies there, quite close but... cannot be assimilated... [that] places the one haunted by it literally beside himself" (1). This spatial dynamic, described by Kristeva, perfectly sums up Martine's experience of pregnancy; rather than becoming a "mother," she is othered inside her own body by something that is always present, that which she can neither assimilate nor expel—a fetus, another life. Her own body becomes occupied territory that no longer belongs wholly to herself; as Kristeva explains, "'I' am becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which 'I' become, I give birth to myself amidst the violence of sobs, of vomit" (3). This zero-sum interchange mirrors Martine's understanding of her pregnancies as a battle to the death and reveals that the abject is constituted by a relationship to reproduction. Kristeva continues on to establish the corpse as the figure *par excellence* of the abject—yet along with scholars Kinitra Dechaun Brooks and Masoumeh Mehni, I contend that "the process of abjection begins with pregnancy," rather than the corpse:

"Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us... [what] causes abjection [is] what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."
(Kristeva 2)

This description, from the first pages of *Powers of Horror*, easily evokes the figure of an impregnated body, a maternal figure, rather than a corpse. Despite her best efforts and repeated rejections, Martine can never successfully part from her pregnancies; instead, she is "engulfed" by their imaginary, uncanny resemblance to her rapist and the associated, imagined threat to the point that *she* becomes the real threat to herself, and by extension, the fetus (3).

In her work, Brooks focuses on the physical abjection of pregnancy and parturition, calling it a "reaction to the foreign other within the body. A parasite..." (60). To Brooks, the confrontation with death, necessary to evoke abjection, stems from the uncanny physical symptoms of maternity, such as "extreme fatigue, early lactation, bleeding gums, nosebleeds, vivid dreams and disturbing thoughts" (60). This logic certainly reflects Martine's maternal experience in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; however, the concatenation of abjection and specifically the *black* maternal precedes and transcends the physical abjection of pregnancy as seen in such ground-breaking work as Hortense Spillers' incomparable "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Spillers begins her consideration of the black maternal subject by drawing our attention to the execution of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which inverted traditional patrilineage to establish matrilineal inheritance as the prevailing legal principle of chattel slavery and mandated the mother's status as slave be passed down to all future descendants of her line (79-

80). Spiller's analysis makes clear that this policy causes the black maternal to be "synonymous" with slavery as its precondition and "structuring condition" (Spillers 80; Clarke Kaplan 89). As historian Jennifer Morgan further highlights in her work *Laboring Woman: Reproduction and Slavery in New World Slavery*, the exploitation of women's literal labor alongside their potential reproductive labor is a critical axis along which colonial culture and power were exercised, along which colonial constructions of sex and gender were constructed, and against which enslaved women's resistance was forged and tested:

"Slaveowners appropriated their reproductive lives by claiming children as property, by rewriting centuries-old European laws of descent, and by defining a biologically driven perpetual racial slavery through the real and imaginary reproductive potential of women whose 'blackness' was produced by and produced their enslavability." (Morgan, *Laboring Women* 1)

In examining these overlapping senses of labor, Morgan reformulates revolutionary Frantz Fanon's notorious construction of black self-alienation, suggesting that the experience of the enslaved black mother is perhaps the archetype of self-alienation—the "experience [of] the alienation of reproductive labor... [shaped] an enslaved woman's sense of herself as commodified" (108).

Both Jennifer L. Morgan and Sara Clarke Kaplan prove the pertinence of re-reading key texts of the black Atlantic through a black feminist lens, further emphasizing how the black maternal has haunted the black Atlantic, both

invisible and yet undeniable. In *The Black Reproductive*, Sara Clarke Kaplan picks up this rhetorical baton and claims that the "fictive biological marker conveyed by the mother" (Morgan, *Laboring Women* 4) was not only "blackness" but also, borrowing Orlando Patterson's formulation, social death:

"In short, *partus* made social death—the status of social nonentity produced and maintained by the material and discursive structures of slavery—an inalienable matrilineal inheritance. Under the rule of *partus*, the material and ideological conditions of the plantation economy—the multigenerational social death of the slave—were reproduced literally on, in, and through the enslaved woman's reproductive body, and through the **management of black intimate life.**" (Clarke Kaplan 14)

This phrasing—"the management of black intimate life"—particularly resonates with Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.

Breath, Eyes, Memory is structured around Sophie's comings and goings to and from her birthplace, Haiti. After leaving her childhood home in Haiti to reunite with her mother in New York, Sophie learns that she was the product of a rape that haunts her mother every night. Her mother also tells her that the only benefit of the rape was that it ended the "testings," the regular rituals when her mother, Sophie's grandmother, would physically test her hymen. Despite her own trauma, Sophie's mother begins testing her when she is old enough to be interested in sex, which causes Sophie to severely wound herself in order to be free of this nightly humiliation. This tempest of trauma and pain follow Sophie into her life as a mother, until she journeys back to Haiti to supposedly heal. The

novel culminates in the suicide of Sophie's mother, who found herself pregnant again and could not bear it, after she reveals to Sophie that she tried everything possible to abort Sophie as well.

In *A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being*, scholar Kaiama Glover argues that the disorderly women of Caribbean literature, like our murderous mothers, "encourage us to imagine refusal itself as a legitimate critique and to not burden the refuser with an obligation to fix things or to refashion the world for all of us" (3). She subsequently reformulates the same sentiment with the question, "Are we able to tolerate refusal that does not result in the triumph of the subject or her community?" (33). Martine's self-administered abortion, which results in her own destruction and death, is such an act of refusal that "does not result in triumph" and yet critiques the lived experience of maternity in the afterlife of slavery. As historian and social theorist Achille Mbembe argues in *Necropolitics*, in the reality of the plantation system, "resistance and self-destruction are largely synonymous" — as a result, the reader is invited to embrace Martine's refusal as resistance despite (and due to) her concurrent self-destruction (89). Further illustrating Glover's theory of refusal, Martine is not motivated by politics or liberation, but by the desperation of self-preservation — thus, she "offer[s] refusal without promise. A praxis of 'no,' full stop" (31).

In her essay "The Visual Frequency of Black Life," Campit clearly outlines the value of refusal as a rejection of untenable subjectivity and subjecthood, as well as emphasizing the paradoxically freeing power of "us[ing] negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power" (25). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Martine refuses to mother, to be mother, and that must be enough. She accesses a historically silenced space where "the black body is catalyzed as both subject and subjected, destroyed and resurgent, abject and resplendent" (Campit 42-43). Amid these productive paradoxes, what Gladys M. Francis calls an "aesthetics of negation," (73) Martine's zone of contact with the reader reminds us of Fanon's assertions that to turn against the colonizer is also to turn against oneself and that refusal, violent or not, inaugurates a political becoming:

"In his work, this decolonization is likened to a force of refusal and it stands directly opposed to the passion of habituation. *This force of refusal constitutes the first moment of the political and of the subject.* In fact, the subject of the political—or the Fanonian subject period— is *born to the world and to itself through this inaugural gesture, namely the capacity to say no.*"¹ (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 139)

Thus, Martine's violent self-destruction is legible as the refusal to yield to her body, a politics of both revolt and care simultaneously, that prioritizes her own desires and well-being above anyone else's, be they progeny or colonizer.

¹ Emphasis my own

Martine exercises a singular moment of sovereignty at the end of her life, ending her life, by refusing to yield “these arms, this body, this strength,” *refusing to acquiesce to her social death*, which forsakes and weaponizes her life in the process (Foucault, *The Punitive Society* 187).

Martine's choice—her refusal to share her body with another being—is deeply related to her history of sexual violence: the nightly testing of her virginity and the rape from which Sophie originated. Despite her own sexual trauma, as a mother Martine follows *her* mother's example and begins physically "test" Sophie's hymen, which causes Sophie to severely wound herself to be free of this nightly humiliation. These tests are a scar, a lingering trace of the everyday violences under Duvalier's regime², whose reproduction by Haitian mothers turns several generations of mothers and daughters into enforcers of precisely that "management of black intimate life" (14). This tempest of trauma and pain unfortunately follows Sophie into her own life as a mother and culminates in the self-destruction of Martine, who finds herself pregnant again and cannot bear it. Danticat here draws a parallel between the tradition of

² The Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti was a brutal, authoritarian regime that lasted from 1957 to 1986, spanning the rule of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier (1957–1971) and his son Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier (1971–1986). The regime was characterized by political repression, violence, and corruption, with the use of state-sponsored terror to maintain control.

"testing" in Haiti and the sexual violence perpetrated against Martine and countless other Haitian women under and after Duvalier's dictatorship:

"I did it,' she said, 'because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater excuse. I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day.'" (172-173)

That is to say, Danticat makes visible the sexual violence in the quotidien, the daily lives of Haitian women, notably without villainizing the women who repeated the violence done to them in the name of tradition and family honor. I read these testimonies as evidence of what Clarke Kaplan called "the management of black intimate life" in the afterlife of slavery — keying in to both Ifé and Martine's inability to explain why they continued the testing other than because it "[was] done to [them]," we can read this practice as a trace of the slave trade's "tight control over bodies," particularly female bodies (Danticat 172; Mbembe 86-87). The phenomenon of "testing" is yet another manner by which "the multigenerational social death of the slave [is] reproduced literally on, in, and through the... reproductive body" (Clarke Kaplan 14).

In the case of Martine and Sophie, this trauma abject-ifies the black maternal and turns any act of sex, even consensual sex, into an act of violence — as a result, pregnancy and reproduction are always already compromised, always ready haunted. The looming threat and unresolved trauma in Martine's

mind leads to her constant abjection, her self-harm and her suicide attempts.

Martine's final act of desperation is not easily legible as freedom, resistance, or revolt. At best, Danticat's description provokes the same morbid, monstrous curiosity as a grisly car accident, that which we are compelled to witness despite the instinct or desire to avert the gaze:

"'What happened?' I was shouting at Marc.

'I woke up in the middle of the night. Sometimes, I wake up and she's not there, so I was not worried. Two hours passed and I woke up again, I went to the bathroom and she was lying there.'

'Lying there? Lying where? Talk faster, will you?'

'In blood. She was lying there in blood.'

'Did she slip and fall?'

'It was very hard to see.'

'What was very hard to see?'

'She had a mountain of sheets on the floor. She had prepared this.'

'What?'

'She stabbed her stomach with an old rusty knife. I counted, and they counted again in the hospital. Seventeen times.'

'Are you sure?'

'It was seventeen times.'

'How could you sleep?' I shouted.

'She was still breathing when I found her,' he said. 'She even said something in the ambulance. She died there in the ambulance.'

'What did she say in the ambulance?'

'*Mwen pa kapab ankò*. She could not carry the baby. She said that to the ambulance people.'" (228-229)

This passage distinctly and directly recalls what Gladys Francis calls "aesthetic of the odious"³ in *Odious Caribbean Women and the Palpable Aesthetics of Transgression* through its inclusion of "sickening details... from which it is difficult to conveniently disengage" (xiv-xv). In this graphic exchange, which doubles the earlier exchange between mother and daughter, Danticat references the power of the gaze (specifically the instinct to avert it in the face of disaster) through Marc's stilted recounting of the scene, the way he avoids the crux of the tragedy, and his words—"It was very hard to see" (229). And yet, the short lines of dialogue between Marc and Sophie quicken the pacing of this scene, building suspense and demanding "conscientious witnessing and agency" from the reader as Sophie demands answers from Marc (Francis xv). Painfully, inconceivably, Sophie is forced to recognize the veracity of not only her mother's death but also Martine's will to be free from pregnancy even at the expense of her own self-destruction—she whose womb had been weaponized against her since childhood weaponized it in turn, wielding it as an arm in her *goûte-sèl*. And yet, the taste for life exhibited

³ "An embodied odious aesthetic is *not* transgressional in the sense that it feeds into a culture of shock that commodifies violence; these odious re/presentations put forth complex processes that call for conscientious witnessing and agency, rather than otiose spectatorship. With the aesthetic of the odious, the witness encounters sickening details (e.g., as seen in trauma driven performances) presented through complex processes from which it is difficult to conveniently disengage. In fact, the transgressional dimension of the odious features a *reversal* of (shock culture) commodification when looking at issues of pain and violence... An aesthetic of the odious calls for conscientious witnessing and agency in the depictions of "co-constituted" transactions to create a connectedness and fragmentation of bodies that live/perform/endure the experience of resistance, civic disobedience, citizenship, gender, sexual identity, and ethnicity." (Francis xiv-xv)

by Martine does not result in her success; instead, her *goüte-sel* is a personal standard, *the drive to live according to her own autonomy or not at all*, which is still a form of necropolitical emancipation. It is only then that Martine's actions take on the sheen of resistance—“[above] all, the reader witnesses the experience of that resistance, *no matter its outcome for the black female body*. It is the experience of resistance the reader is called to read”⁴ (Francis 5).

In *The Black Reproductive*, Clarke Kaplan also argues that “blackness and reproduction are co-constitutive terms that, even in each other’s absence, shape the parameters by which each is understood and deployed. Indeed... [echoing Moten] blackness itself is ‘unavoidably reproducible and reproductive’” (12). As a result of the mutually assured reproduction, the lines of kinship are replaced with factory lines, stamping out new cases of social death in the name of production, inside the black maternal body. However, the black maternal not only posits this specific relationship to social death, an abstraction, but also to the material and graphic realities of life and death, the lived experience of the black maternal⁵. Forced to live and to reproduce, denied death, the enslaved mother serves and preserves the world order of slavery; thus, the destruction of her

⁴ Emphasis my own.

⁵ “Patterson’s schema cannot account for the inextricable articulation of such modalities of power with slavery’s intimate violences of forced sex, coerced procreation, and ruptured kinship...” (Clarke Kaplan 91)

progeny and/or her own body (i.e. her capacity to reproduce, the womb) overlaps with the disruption of production, a particularly morbid kind of strike. As a result, while *partus sequitur ventrum* is clearly a legal policy, it is most intelligible as a biopolitical and necropolitical exercise of power.

In *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe expertly traverses the political and social order of slavery as an “organization for death” by building on the theoretical works of Michel Foucault, Georges Bataille, and Frantz Fanon, among others (7). According to Mbembe, the plantation is not only an economic world, but a political and social world as well—a world order constituted through racism as a technology of death. In assembling this argument, Mbembe cites Foucault’s understandings of sovereignty and biopower to make it clear that the institutions of slavery and colonialism functioned through the exercise of sovereignty as the power to *make live* and *let die* (66). Foucault’s conception of biopower is both necessary and insufficient to understand the world order of Atlantic slavery; race is, after all a function of biology, but it is also and “above all a technology aimed at permitting the exercise of biopower” (71). However, Mbembe outlines that racism as a technology of death is “far from being a simple biological signifier” and depends on the *reproduction* and *extraction of labor* from the expendable bodies of the living dead, the enslaved (10-12). While Mbembe does not explicitly consider the double-valences of these terms, particularly as they relate to the

black maternal, the conceptual concatenation is undeniable. The biopolitical state, according to Foucault, “made the management, protection, and cultivation of life coextensive with the sovereign right to kill” (71). In other words, the use of enslaved mothers’ labor(s) to (re)produce a labor force is the precondition, the condition of possibility, for the creation and preservation of the plantation system (of racial biocapitalism, to echo Weinbaum). The technologies of *controlled reproduction* are therefore the most crucial and “original feature[s]” of the exercise of racialized biopower:

“In most instances, racial selection, prohibiting mixed marriages, forced sterilization, and indeed exterminating vanquished peoples found their first testing ground in the colonial world.” (Mbembe 76)

Partus sequitur ventrem and the black maternal, however, demonstrate the other side of that genocidal “terror formation” —namely, “sexualized violence, coercive reproduction, and forced labor” —epitomized most clearly in the necropolitical execution of *partus sequitur ventrem* (Clarke Kaplan 98).

What Mbembe calls the “tight control over bodies” extends the forced and sustained production of death-in-life to serve as labor force and reproduce slavery as an economic system; the black maternal is therefore and above all the “besieged body” or the “body-of-extraction”, a technology of black social death and of blackness as abjection (86-87, 90, 159). Mbembe further reinforces the critical nature of forced reproduction to racial capitalism and further underpins

the commodification of the black maternal into a manufacturing factory under capitalism:

“Three sorts of drives have effectively impelled capitalism since its origins. The first is the constant manufacturing of races, or species (as it happens, Negroes); the second is the seeking to calculate and convert everything into exchangeable commodities (law of generalized exchange relations); and the third is the attempt to maintain a monopoly over the manufacture of the living as such.” (177)

Under these conditions—the veritable death-world of the plantation system in which biopower is exercised to make-live and let-die, and sovereignty is defined as power over death—making-dead is re-signified as a reclamation of sovereignty, an initiation of subjectivity, and a strategy of resistance. The most easily recognizable form of making-dead as an act of agency and resistance, in the symbolic and political order outlined by Mbembe, is suicide:

“Whether read from the perspective of slavery or that of colonial occupation, death and freedom are irrevocably interwoven... this preference for death over continued servitude is a commentary on the nature of freedom itself (or the lack thereof) ... Referring to the practice of individual or mass suicide by slaves cornered by slave catchers, Gilroy suggests that death, in this case, can be represented as agency. For death is precisely that from and over which I have power.” (91-92).

In this context, death as agency is the refusal of life in the face of biopolitical pressure to (bare) life. In today’s world order, a world of suicide bombers, kamikaze pilots, and hunger strikes, suicide [read: death-making] as agency is uncomfortable, yet familiar. Fellow political theorist Banu Bargu develops this

idea, the “weaponization of life,” and develops the term “necroresistance” in her work *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*. Returning then to the figure of Martine and her desperate self-annihilation, in the context of the black Atlantic, necroresistance encompasses those acts of violent acts of resistance that destroy the black maternal body, and by extension, the self, through the weaponization of the womb both materially and discursively.

Before and after her death, the character of Martine is not readily intelligible according to any of the archetypes established in the black Atlantic canon: not the slave in revolt, epitomized by Caliban, not the mulatto mediator Ariel. She is not “a muse, ... [a metaphor] for the violated and exploited homeland, or ... [a] noble mother-[warrior]” who soldiers for the cause (Glover 17). Martine does not enable “ancestral connection” nor is she the receptacle for “intergenerational knowledge” in Sophie's life (21-22). She is not stereotypically maternal or loving—and yet she *is* a mother, a term (over)loaded with symbolic value in the black Atlantic:

“'Motherhood' occupies mythic proportions in the African American historical narrative. The imaginary past is peopled with selfless women working endless hours to support their children—mamas with expansive hearts and bosoms and a ferocious protectiveness, warriors who shouldered weapons while nursing babies.” (Morgan, *Laboring Women* 113)

Against the landscape of these maternal representations, monstrous monsters chart a new path, one that begins to dismantle the categories of motherhood and

reproduction in the context of slavery and its afterlives. Despite the rejections of her pregnancies, Martine very clearly experiences maternal desire in the second half of the book, "[even] though she had forced it on [Sophie], of her sudden will, [they] were now even more than friends... twins, in spirit. *Marasas*" (203). Martine complicates the essentialist archetypes and examples of motherhood that litter the black Atlantic archive. Despite straying far from the recognizable paths of motherhood tracked by those who came before her, despite her apparent failures and shortcomings, Martine's existence, and death, testify to an entire range of unpalatable maternal figures who (re)weaponize the womb in the afterlife of slavery, drawing our gaze and demanding our attention.

infanticide and necropolitics

Martine's other *marasa*⁶ could be Marie-Célie Agnant's Emma, another tragic and tortured mother pushed to violence:

"...Something about her behaviour changed when she discovered that she was expecting that child and that she was already three months pregnant. The normal order of things, her movements, nothing was done in the same way anymore; she was no longer the same. A long time after she was committed, I discovered that she had tried to abort the baby. I found a bizarre paraphernalia in a bathroom closet: a long tube with a

⁶ "Marassa is actually part of the African tradition where there are twin deities. In the tradition of the Ibegi in Africa, twins are considered very special, in some cases to be very powerful. If one of the twins dies, the other will carry an effigy. Marassa in common language means twins. Often politicians, if they want to identify with someone, will say, "He and I are twins." ... I wanted to use all the connotations of twins in the story. Going back to the mother- daughter relationship, the idea is that two people are one, but not quite; they might look alike and talk alike but are, in essence, different people..." (Shea and Danticat 385)

suction cup at one end, long tongs, and an assortment of herbs that she had been steeping..." (Agnant 49)

Once again, this shocking and graphic litany of abortion practices signals a new grammar and taxonomy around infanticide, which is usually shrouded in silence or enmeshed with medical jargon. Here, Agnant leans into the aesthetic of the odious, transgressing all the limits of respectability and polite society to evoke the utter abjection of the black maternal in the afterlife of slavery. Agnant establishes the odious in this work by transgressing the limits of taboo, forcing readers to immediately grapple with the imminent probability of maternal infanticide and the gruesome description of a child's dismembered body equated to trash:

"I go through the pieces of paper, which dirty my fingers. Emma was photographed from every angle. The pen-pushers of all the tabloids revelled in her blue skin. One particular reporter, who didn't know the history or the geographical location of the island Emma comes from, described the town where she was born, a place called Grand-Lagon, in the Caribbean. That spot, he wrote is as bad as the lepers' quarters in Calcutta. Emma's impoverished childhood made the headlines, and a photograph of little Lola was spread across the front page of all the dailies. The photo of her skinny body, in pieces, mutilated, ended up in everyone's garbage can among the dirty papers, the bits of rags, and the refuse carried away by the garbage men. To accompany the photograph, a caption, or rather, a cliché: 'A black Woman Sacrifices Her Child... A Voodoo Act?'" (16)

This passage exposes first that the question of Emma's alleged crime is deeply entangled with the history of Haiti and the slave trade and secondly that no

amount of monstrous, odious, or wicked content will be spared. As readers, we will be given no MPAA ratings or trigger warnings; once again, we are called upon to maintain our gaze anyway. Agnant evokes the odious haptic in this passage straightaway, conjuring the feeling of "dirty" fingertips blackened with carbon from thumbing through newspaper clippings; in this first sentence, the reader and Flore overlap, both spectators consuming and consumed by the forthcoming sickening details, marked and contaminated by the invasive *schadenfreude* of the media and their audiences.

In *Odious Women and the Palpable Aesthetics of Transgression*, Gladys Francis notes this aesthetic across Caribbean literature and names it an embodied experience of the haptic:

"Coming from the Greek *haptikos*, haptic signifies what 'pertains to the sense of touch,' or the ability 'to come into contact with.' In other words, perceptual sensitivity in the aesthetic domain is associated more with tactility than with vision... the readers experience transgressive 'mental pictures' of multisensorial characters. These sensorial perceptions and depictions... include auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory and/or kinesthetic sensations... an 'aesthetic of the tangible' that creates imaginary 'zones of contact' between the reader and the represented body in pain."
(xvi)

Agnant applies this aesthetic viscerally in this previous excerpt, doubling Lola's dismembered, sickeningly vulnerable body with the proliferated and discarded photos of it—" [the] photo of her skinny body, in pieces, mutilated, ended up in everyone's garbage can among the dirty papers, the bits of rags, and the refuse

carried away by the garbage men" (xvi). This description raises the gorge, forging an unholy awareness of our own bodies (Francis' "zone of contact") as we are drawn into this multi-sensorial scene, into the rumbling vibrations of rolling a trashcan to the curb and the wafting smells of decay and decomposition (xvi). The end of this passage is the first time the reader has an idea of what may have landed Emma in a mental hospital and the stakes of Flore's "conscientious witnessing" (Francis xv). The headline, "A Black Woman Sacrifices Her Child... A Voodoo Act?", reveals the knot of entangled, intertwined stakes at the heart of Flore's investigation and Emma's story: the reduction of Emma's identity to "black woman," the stereotypical evocation of Hollywood "Voodoo," and the fading of Lola into a nameless child. Despite Flore's recognition of this headline as a cliché, it begs the question, "For what reason did Emma kill her child in such an odious manner?"⁷ (Booluck 10).

Agnant further contextualizes the necropolitical logic that motivates infanticide in the story of Emma's ancestor Kilima, a young Bantu girl kidnapped from her mother's arms during the slave trade. The tragic story of Kilima, with whom "everything started," tangibly constructs the historical zones of the hold and the slave trade, often evoked by Emma in her "mad" rants, and reveals what

⁷ Translation my own. Original: "*Pour quelle raison Emma a-t-elle tué son enfant d'une manière aussi odieuse ?*"

(and who) haunts Emma in the present (162). Agnant retains the aesthetic of the odious to describe the experiences of rape and the resulting pregnancies as one of, if not the, primal wounds of the Middle Passage:

"The whites from France had seized that island to appropriate everything that was there. In return, they were dumping onto the island armfuls of everything that was rotten in their country. And that rot set about swelling in the bellies of the women they were bringing in by boat from the lands on the other side of the ocean." (164)

The odious in these descriptions takes on a disembodied quality to disentangle biological reproduction from the crimes of flesh perpetrated against enslaved bodies, creating a material and metaphoric dissociation that is not a politics of care but of radical rejection. In the hold and in the fields, the prevailing code of *partus sequitur ventrem* set the condition of possibility for widespread sexual and reproductive violence by "whites, blacks, less-white whites, [and] less-black blacks," which is one of the "obscene" inheritances that haunts Emma's line (165). Emma interjects in her narration of the story by speaking to Flore directly and reflecting that the obscenity that accompanies suffering "obliges us to put our entire hand into the wound," then rhetorically asking "That's certainly what I am doing, isn't it, Flore?" (166). This startling image carries many overlapping centers of meaning, provoking a visceral image of infanticidal practices and acknowledging the ethics of the odious, the obligation to face and engage with representations of the body-in-pain instead of "crossing your arms in the sterile

pose of a spectator" (Césaire 95). As a result, Emma implies that practices of infanticide might themselves be a form of conscientious witnessing and engaged agency.

Emma's interjection—"Alas, this obscenity... obliges us to put our entire hand into the wound"—calls out across time and space to Fabienne Kanor's mute woman in *Humus* (Agnant 166). In the first fragment dedicated to the women of *Le Soleil*, "the mute woman," Kanor excruciatingly reconstructs the experience of the barracoons and the hold—the "road to oblivion"—as well as memories of her native country from the perspective of a woman so traumatized that she has "forgotten" how to speak and has completely lost language (Kanor and Palermo 15). The mute woman mirrors Kanor herself, forced to "invent" language to fill the historical void around these women: "Lost words are lost forever. To speak all that is in my mind, I'd have to invent. Words for laughing, words for forgetting words, words for acting as if. Who still cares about the details" (Kanor and Palermo 13). These lines gesture meta-narratively at Kanor's work in writing this book, inventing stories and language to fill the silence left by these women, lost to the archives before Kanor's intervention. However, it also gestures toward language itself as a means of oppression and self-alienation, as we know from Fanon:

“To speak... means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization...A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied in that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power.” (*Black Skins* 17-18)

Thus, the mute woman's loss of language can be read as the visceral personification of the losses of culture and civilization—of the right to culture and civilization—and most clearly the expression of abject powerlessness. And yet, as the mute woman invents her own language without speaking, she also exercises power where she can.

Under these conditions, namely the loss of language, the mute-qua-Kanor invents a new taxonomy and grammar of sexual violence and abortion:

"One night, they ate my belly. The man was alone but felt like a hundred. I had run out of tears when he came in. I thought only of my finger in my throat. The finger that would never be enough to get rid of it all. I would need two, my whole hand, my arm. Until this man's water was gone. He never tried again, no doubt knew about my finger."⁸ (Kanor and Palermo 14)

In this passage, Kanor emphasizes sexual violence as the consumption of the black female body; the man "eats" her belly/womb (*ventre*), signaling the man's complete appropriation of her body and the mute woman's resulting

⁸ "Une nuit, ils m'ont mangé le ventre. L'homme était seul mais c'est comme s'ils étaient cent. Je n'avais plus aucune larme quand il est entré. Je songeais seulement à mon doigt dans la gorge. Ce doigt qui ne suffirait jamais à tout enlever. J'ai pensé qu'il faudrait que j'en mette deux, la main, le bras. Jusqu'à ce que toute l'eau de l'homme parte. Il n'a plus jamais recommencé, sans doute savait-il pour mon doigt." (Kanor 19)

thingification⁹, in which what was a body is now a source of fuel and pleasure for the slave trader (14). Earlier in her story, the mute woman recalls her life before her capture and relives everyday moments of life and survival before the upheaval and transformation of the slave trade; in this paragraph, the mute woman asserts and insists upon the existence and dignity of her people, who "eat, dance, and cook" (Kanor and Palermo 14). Thus, her declaration that they "ate her belly" reveals a perverse and perfidious reversal, testifying to the basic agencies denied to slave women in the hold (and through the slave trade) (14). This description recalls the abject and the odious through the mute woman's immediate thoughts of inducing vomiting as a method of abortion; however, she is forced to instead reenact her own trauma by using her hands to "rid" herself of the unwanted pregnancy (14).

Notably, the rape and unwanted pregnancy are only implied in this rendering; Kanor obliges the reader to engage in this primal scene of violence and to adopt the taxonomy of the enslaved:

"This palpable and transgressive aesthetic of the odious circumvents any simplistic attempt to gain the readers' empathy. Rather, it encourages an engaged witnessing (as opposed to a voyeur posture) and embodied transformative lived experiences that break the distance vis-à-vis the "other" black body. *Humus* is therefore an invitation to engage in an

⁹ Thingification (*chosification* in French) is a concept developed by Aimé Césaire, the Martiniquan poet, playwright, and anti-colonial thinker, in his seminal work *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950). It refers to the dehumanization of colonized people, reducing them to mere objects or commodities under colonial rule.

uncomfortable but necessary conversation about invisible or silenced traumas caused by capitalism, imperialism, (neo)colonialism, and (forced) immigration. It is a phenomenology of the transgressive that mobilizes the readers and makes them confront what they might rather dismiss, which conjointly tests their tolerance." (Francis, "afterword 198)

According to the new grammar constructed in the mute woman's testimony, the act of abortion is not only relieved of any moral or ethical concerns but also recast as a strategy of relief and even elevation. In French, Kanor utilizes the verb *enlever* (to remove) to obliquely refer to abortion—"Ce doigt qui ne suffirait jamais à tout enlever"—which is derived from the French *lever* (to raise) and can signify a displacement through an upward motion as well as a violent elevation, such as that of a roof blown off a house during a tornado (Kanor, *Humus* 19; "Enlever"). This word choice emphasizes the violence of this act but also conjures an aesthetic of both rejection and relief, not unlike vomiting rancid or rotten food, in which ridding herself of any trace of the slave trader violently reclaims the mute woman's body as her own, rather than the trader's or fetus's, and in a way purifies the body of outside contaminants through radical transgression. As Dominique Aurelia observes in her reading of *Humus*, in Kanor's reconstruction of these women's voices, "the body is language, she [Kanor] tells us... bodies that

speak and narrate... tombstone-bodies"¹⁰ (73). Gladys M. Francis picks up this argument, adding that the women in *Humus* "are able to resist colonial taxonomies by shifting their bodies from passive to active embodied beings" ("afterword" 199). Thus, the mute woman's abortion is a strategy of embodiment that allow violated black women to reclaim their own bodily autonomy and "resist colonial taxonomies," notably through the creation and construction of counter-taxonomies, as seen in this excerpt from Kanor's *Humus* (Francis, "afterword" 199).

This strategy of embodiment is also evoked throughout the story of Kilima, whose story Emma is passing down to Flore when she interjects that she [Emma] is "[putting] her entire hand into the wound". During this meta-narrative, Kilima's chapter of *Le Livre d'Emma*, Agnant also constructs a counter-taxonomy of maternity, largely eschewing terms like pregnancy, birth, babies, and children in favor of odious descriptions of the body in pain. Pregnancy is referred to as a "swelling in the bellies of women," which highlights reproduction as a biological process without any of the usual emotional or ethical weight (164). Offspring are "rot" and "dead fish" instead of babies or children, while birth is

¹⁰ Translation my own. Original: "...car le corps est langage, nous dit-elle. Corps qui parlent et racontent : corps qui chancellent (*Les chiens ne font pas des chats* 2008), corps-tombeaux (*Humus* 2006) corps humiliés (*D'eaux douces* 2004, *Anticorps* 2010) corps en dérive (*Faire l'aventure* 2014)." (Aurélia 73)

expulsion and regurgitation, a vomiting up of spoiled matter (174). These descriptions distance the actors in question from the usual ethical and moral pressures towards love, care, and compassion that accompany the experience of birth. This radical dissociation culminates in Kilima's failed infanticide and successful suicide, both of which are viscerally associated with revolt:

"Kilima, with the help of a few slaves, spread gasoline throughout the plantation and set fire to it. Then, they fled into the hills carrying Cécile with them. Later, Kilima gave birth to a daughter [named Emma] whom she attempted to drown; after that she went mad. One day, dressed completely in white, she walked into the ocean and never came back. She had returned to the route of the big boats..." (187)

In this summary, Agnant-qua-Mattie uses short, declarative sentences devoid of sensory details or appeals to *pathos* to stage Kilima's revolt, infanticide, and suicide, a narrative strategy at odds with most of Emma's retelling of Mattie's story. Despite building up to this scene over the entire work, its actual narration is anticlimactic and without emotion. I argue that this stark, almost sterile description calls its recipient to witness this taboo, controversial act of violence without digesting it—without moralizing, justifying, or alleviating any of the uncomfortable, uneasy ambiance, "a *reversal* of (shock culture) commodification when looking at issues of pain and violence" (Francis xiv). Kilima's story is not to be consumed, "[impeding] the commodification or consumption of the black body or the feminine" (Francis 69).

Agnant further builds a "complex process" that makes it "difficult to conveniently disengage" from this story by so clearly setting up Kilima as Emma's *marasa* and foreshadowing Emma's fate (Francis xiv-xv). After Kilima's attempted infanticide, she "went mad," doubling Emma's institutionalization after being accused of infanticide; by the end of this work, Emma too will dress herself in white and walk into a river to end her life, as "[she] always said, she said repeatedly, that she would return to the route of the big boats" (Agnant 198-199). It is only after being notified of Emma's suicide that Flore remembers Emma's words about her daughter's death, the sole mention of the crime that had precipitated their encounters in the first place:

"That curse from the holds of the slave ships is such that the very womb that carries us can crush us. And the flesh on your own flesh transforms itself into a fanged beast and, from within, eats you up. That's why Lola needed to die. What did it matter, now or later; what did it matter? Like me, Lola was condemned." (Agnant 197)

Given the imbrication of Emma and Kilima's stories, the reader is left to assume that Emma most likely did commit infanticide, as Mattie had predicted she would¹¹. However, at this point in the narrative, Agnant has laid out an infernal

¹¹ "You won't have anyone to pass the lifeline on to. But, before that, you will be rid of all the bitterness that we carry in our veins. As though in a very ancient dream, you will repeat the deeds of the women of the clan, the efforts they made to shelter their children from the garrotes that choked them in the hold of the slave ships and in the fields of sugar cane... 'Kilima's clan's last drop of blood, deported to the New World, will be extinguished with you, like an eye that closes. It will be extinguished with you, my daughter... 'It will be extinguished in a great din.'" (Agnant 166-167)

calculus, a necropolitical lens, through which the murder of one's child has become a suspected (if not expected) archetype of the black mother-daughter dyad:

"Motherhood, for instance, cannot possibly remain unmodified when it is understood in the context of both the overwhelming commodification of the bodies of infants and their mothers, and the potential impulse women may have felt to interrupt such obscene calculations... In such an account, a rejection of emotional connections, a refusal to protect, would be just as rational and likely a configuration of the mother-child relationship as was the bonds of motherhood... that has fast become an archetype of enslaved motherhood." (Morgan, *Laboring Women* 201)

Morgan's analysis encourages us to "interrogate the ways in which women's reproductive potential shaped the form and the meaning of their opposition to slavery" (11). As a result, the infanticidal mother is not only at times "rational and likely" in the slave episteme and its afterlives, but also disruptive and defiant in charting a course of resistance that is molded from and by her reproductive alienation (201).

Similarly, in *Necropolitics*, Mbembe claims that "sovereignty takes [the] form... of a *refusal* to accept the limits that death would have the subject respect"¹² (70). Coming back to Emma and her murderous *marasas*, the refusal of black maternity through the death of the infant becomes recognizable as an act of

¹² Emphasis my own.

resistance. Mbembe further asserts that “sovereignty requires ‘the strength to violate the prohibition against killing’”; in the context of the black maternal, the claiming of sovereignty requires an even greater strength, the strength to violate the prohibitions and taboos against killing of infants, born and unborn (70). As proven by Jennifer Morgan and others, infanticide is a violent disruption of the intimate technologies at work to control the subjecthood of the black maternal in the plantation system and opens space for the sovereignty and subjectivity of the black maternal as abjection *and* resistance:

“The enslaved mother’s infanticidal act can thus be read as the emergence of that which has been put under erasure: a subjectivity in excess of the modes of subjection within which she is embedded and through which she and her children have been made slaves. She is the radical alterity of chattel slavery’s dispossession, which ‘outruns and counters the conditions of its emergence,’ temporarily transfiguring social and subject formations. The material and discursive crisis that she enacts exemplifies the contingent, contradictory, and impossible practice of black freedom that can be located, however transiently, at the heart of black unfreedom. With her ‘monstrous and unnatural deed,’ then, the infanticidal enslaved mother signifies one example of the political potentials of ‘claiming the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to ‘name’).” (Clarke Kaplan 99)

Imagining Morgan and Mbembe in conversation, then, we are invited to recognize that a two-fold challenge to the discursive logic of slavery — that infanticide can be rational, a “dialectical movement of reason,” *and* that through the transgression of a taboo (several, in fact) infanticide challenges and disorients discursive limits that stem from Enlightenment logic (70). The role of the reader

or spectator is to witness and recognize both impulses. Interestingly, Mbembe categorizes this creative political potential, born of violating taboos, as a "spiral transgression," a formulation that recalls the critical works of the Haitian Spiralists¹³ as well as Caribbeanists Gladys M. Francis and Kaiama Glover (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 70).

In *Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon*, Glover establishes the importance of the Spiralist aesthetic in the Haitian context, which can be found in vodou temples, conch shells, hurricane formations, *and* the structure of Haitian stories (viii). According to Glover, influenced by Haitian oral storytelling traditions, the spiral form is characterized by "stories unfold cumulatively or cyclically; are relatively unconcerned with any purely narrative structure or horizontal, linear development; and are subject invariably to the frequent and spontaneous interventions of the public", stories that depend on "the interplay of repetition and deviation at work in the spiral" (viii). This amorphous structure, determined as much by its form as its content, reflects both the structure and the aesthetic of many black Atlantic texts that treat the question of the infanticidal mother, most notably *Le Livre d'Emma*, which also features "an aesthetic rich in imagery and linguistic innovation, producing nonlinear

¹³ Most famously, Frankétienne, Jean-Claude Fignolé, and René Philoctète.

narratives that reflect the physical dismemberment and psychic fracture resulting from the horrors of violence" (Maríñez 4). Returning to Mbembe, for whom the trespassing of taboo represents a "spiral transgression" to the "forward dialectical movement of reason," the discursive strategies employed by black Atlantic writers—the odious, the monstrous, the abject, counter-taxonomy, bodies as language, etc—reflect the content of their works, in which infanticide and abortion are acts of spiral transgression that "[disorient] the very idea of the limit" (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 70). Viewed through the lens of the spiral or the embodied odious aesthetics, these aforementioned works circumvent the voyeuristic, sterile gaze of a neutral observer; they are "*not* transgressional in the sense that [they feed] into a culture of shock that commodifies violence... [they] call for consciousness witnessing and agency, rather than otiose spectatorship" (Francis, *Odious Caribbean Women* xiv). As claimed by Foucault, Mbembe, and Bargo, the shape and form of resistance are shaped by the institutionalized forms of power to which they respond; as a result, in response to "today's form of necropower[, which] blurs the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom," black mothers in the slave episteme and its afterlives exercise forms of revolt that "[blur] the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom," such as infanticide, abortion, and self-harm (Mbembe 92).

The weaponization of the womb by enslaved mothers, and most likely Emma herself, is most evident at the climax of *Le Livre d'Emma*, when Emma passes down her experience of being told the family lore by Mattie, Emma's cousin and adoptive parent. Mattie, who "worshipped [their] history and [their] dreams, faithfully, religiously" (145) implores Emma to understand the roots of Fifie's suffering and antipathy, her monstrosity, in the context of abject black maternal and the inheritance of social death, what we call *partus sequitur ventrem*:

"...the suffering that inhabits us because of what we are, the suffering that inhabits us because the world pushes us aside to the extent of *making us hate our own flesh*, is difficult to understand and accept, Emma. It's not surprising that madness is waiting for us at the end of that tunnel, and *it's then that we destroy our own flesh, because we fear for it, we know what awaits it*.

To live in the skin of a black woman is to live permanently in a night without stars... We want to run away from our black woman's skin like one shuns the night and its demons. Thus, we abandon our own people; *we kill our children*; and we flee even from our own shadow.

...we, the dark women, we are the ones that are *attacked by life* and everything violent that it contains. Life abuses us... You mustn't be mad at Fifie, my little one, in spite of everything, you can't be mad at her. The evil your mother is suffering from comes from far away. It flows in our veins; we swallow it with the first mouthful of our mothers' milk."¹⁴ (132-133)

Without explicitly referencing *partus sequitur ventrem*, Mattie-qua-Agnant here outlines the necropolitical justification for infanticide in the slave episteme by reinforcing Spillers' formulation of the flesh-ification of the captive body. In this

¹⁴ Emphasis my own.

passage, Mattie urges Emma to release her anger towards Fifie by teaching her about the infernal matrilineal inheritance of slavery, all the more "evil" for subverting ancestral and indigenous kinship formations, and offering her own description of what the reader might recognize as *partus*: "The evil your mother is suffering from comes from far away. It flows in our veins; we swallow it with the first mouthful of our mothers' milk" (133).

Further distancing herself from the stakes of liberal humanism and the over-identification with life, Mattie renames abortion and infanticide, christening them the destruction of the flesh, a rejection of that "human and social irreparability [registered] as high crimes against the *flesh*" called the Middle Passage (Spillers 67). This presentation of supposed monstrosity is tempered by its justifications: "because we fear for it, we know what awaits it" (Agnant 132). In this schema, radical violence is re-tooled as politics of *care*, motivated by empathy, love, and concern that cannot easily be assimilated into the epistemological schema of the slave episteme—an epistemological shift that Mattie encourages in Emma. Mattie further registers the characteristic weaponization of life that defines necropolitics by asserting that black women, defined by their reproductive potential, "are attacked [and abused] by life"; as a result, death, and even making-dead, are not only respites from the tyranny of

life in a hostile episteme but also reclamations of sovereignty and agency

(Agnant 132-33).

Prophetic Mattie ultimately aligns Emma with Kilima, revealing that they will share the same fate, and Emma will be the last woman in their line, the end of this cycle of suffering and brutality:

"You won't have anyone to pass the lifeline on to. But, before that, you will be rid of all the bitterness that we carry in our veins. As though in a very ancient dream, you will repeat the deeds of the women of the clan, the efforts they made to shelter their children from the garrotes that choked them in the holds of the slave ships and in the fields of sugar cane...

'Kilima's clan's last drop of blood, deported to the New World, will be extinguished with you, like an eye that closes.'" (166-167)

While this passage confirms, albeit indirectly, that Emma is guilty of murdering Lola, it also confirms the politics of care that motivates and dictates the "deeds of the women of the clan"; in the grammar of Emma-qua-Mattie, Mattie-qua-Agnant, infanticide and abortion are "efforts... made to shelter their children from the garrotes that choked them" (167). In "Histoire(s) et traumatisme(s) : l'infanticide dans le roman féminin antillais," literary critic Antoinette Marie Sol reaffirms the re-signification of dead and making-dead in the black Atlantic novel, arguing that in texts such as *Le Livre d'Emma*, "the *topos* of death is added as an assertion of freedom and refusal—an assertion structured in chiasmus, because the act of generation, the birth of a self, both leads to and even depends

on the negation of an existence"¹⁵ (970). Further, she states, "infanticide in the historical context of slavery is, at its core, an act of both generosity and deprivation, of euthanasia and theft... The two sides of infanticide are love (sparing a beloved and innocent being from the horrors of servitude) and hate (toward the slave system, the master, oneself)"¹⁶ (971).

However, I argue that the weaponization of the womb and acts of infanticide should not be read overly simplistically, as relatively straightforward acts of love and sacrifice:

"If we see childbirth as nothing more than an opportunity to illustrate the ability of enslaved women to release a wellspring of motherlove onto benighted children whom they would sacrifice everything to save [or whom they would save by sacrificing], we do no more than reinscribe ideologies of maternal caregivers grounded in outdated notions of separate spheres, the feminized emotional, and the dichotomies of public/private." (Morgan, *Laboring Women* 167)

In particular, the odious and monstrous aesthetics at play in these works complicate these essentialist narratives of motherhood. The stories of Emma and Martine, for example, redefine the limits of their identities as mothers—their lives "refuse easy categories of compliance or resistance"—they are at once

¹⁵ Translation my own. Original: "Dans les textes traités ici s'ajoute le topos de la mort comme affirmation de liberté et de refus, une affirmation en chiasme puisque l'acte de génération, de naissance d'un soi, entraîne, et dépend même de la négation d'une existence." (Sol 970)

¹⁶ Translation my own. Original: "L'infanticide dans le contexte historique de l'esclavage est, à l'origine, un acte de générosité et de ravissement, d'euthanasie et de vol... Les deux faces de l'infanticide sont de l'amour (épargner un être cher et innocent des horreurs de la servitude) et de la haine (du système esclavagiste, du maître, de soi)."

rejections of maternity and displays of maternal desire (Morgan, *Laboring Women* 167). On the other hand, Fifie, Kilima, and Kanor's mute woman display no maternal desire, no kinship with their progeny, and no signs of love; they dare us to re-read Sol's statement on infanticide as an act of ecstasy (*ravissement*) through which they achieve relief or as act of petty theft (*vol*) without greater purpose. They *choose* self-preservation over a presumed maternal instinct; instead of saving or sacrificing their daughters, these mothers forsake them. Their stories are rejections and refusals that refuse to be co-opted into assimilable, digestible narratives of sacrifice and martyrdom, challenging the recognizable archetypes of motherhood in the black Atlantic.

a politics of revolt and care

While these monstrous mothers do not find kinship with their would-be daughters, they belong to a creepy coven, a murder of crows if you will, that includes the infamous black witch of Salem, Tituba. In her preface to the English edition, activist and writer Angela Davis positions *I, Tituba* as Condé's effort to fill the "silences, omissions, distortions, and fleeting, enigmatic insinuations" of institutionalized colonial history with an "active, constitutive voice" — with a subjectivity historically denied to enslaved peoples (xi-xii). Ann Armstrong Scarsboro, who provided the afterword, "[argues] that *Tituba* exemplifies Glissant's notion of Caribbeanness in that it fills the blank spaces from lost

history, giving voice to the silenced collectivity” (204). Literary scholar Mara Dukats, alternatively, presents *I, Tituba* as a “literal writing-into-being of a historically effaced woman... a textualization of the maternal body” (747). All these scholars agree that *I, Tituba* is a work caught in-between—in between history and literature, in between fact and fiction, in between mothers and daughters.

Once Tituba arrives in Boston as a slave and settles into her new role as the caretaker of her owner's wife and children, she witnesses a traumatic scene that reverberates with her own past and future. Tituba reflects that she “was allowed to take the girls to the Long Wharf, where we looked at the boats and the sea. Beyond this liquid expanse, a speck: Barbados” (48). This proximity to the Atlantic and its familiar landscape set the stage for Tituba’s physical and psychic upheaval—the public execution by hanging of Goody Glover, an accused witch:

"One afternoon, while we were coming back from Long Wharf, we witnessed a sight that left me with a terrible impression, never to be forgotten. As we came out of Front Street, the square—around which were grouped the prison, the courthouse, and the meeting house—was crowded with people. There was going to be an execution. The crowd was jostling around the foot of the raised platform where the gallows stood. A group of sinister men in wide-brimmed hats were busying themselves at its base. When we got closer we saw an old woman with a rope around her neck. Suddenly one of the men removed the plank on which she was standing and her body snapped stiff as a bow. There was a terrible cry and her head fell to one side.

I screamed and fell to my knees in the middle of this restless, inquisitive, almost joyful crowd.

It was as if I had been sentenced to relive my mother's execution. No, it wasn't an old woman hanging there. It was Abena in the flower of her youth and at the height of her beauty. Yes, it was she and I was six years old again. And my life had to begin all over again from that moment! I screamed, and the more I screamed the more I felt the desire to scream. To scream out my suffering, my revolt, and my powerless rage." (48-49)

Overcome by this sudden death, a haunting memory-premonition of Tituba's own past, present, and future, Tituba responds to the "terrible cry" of the dying woman by "[screaming] and [falling] to her knees in the middle of this restless, inquisitive almost joyful crowd" (48). This scene ruptures linear time, connecting generations of inherited trauma, through the scene of the *cri* (or scream). In her work, Renée Larrier argues that "women... subvert silenced history in Caribbean fictional narratives... by reclaim[ing] voice, inscrib[ing] the collective *cri*, and transform[ing] ... a journal or *cahier* into a site of testimony" (282). However, Larrier is also forced to acknowledge that this pattern falls short in Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba*: "Tituba, in fact, rejects writing, trusting the oral tradition in the form of songs and stories to keep her memory alive" (276). Thinking with Larrier and Glover, Tituba's *cri* is a refusal of intelligible voice, the collective and the written word; in this scene, and throughout this work, Condé acknowledges and disrupts the essentialist trends in Caribbean literature that string together woman, *cri*, maternity, and embodied knowledge. Instead, the scene of Tituba's

cri inscribes the particular, evoking monstrous black maternal archetypes and transgressional acts of resistance.

Somewhat shockingly, Tituba's narrative of this harrowing experience ends abruptly with her startling and seemingly apathetic declaration: "It was shortly afterward that I realized I was pregnant and I decided to kill the child" (Condé 49). This statement is closely followed by a graphic, odious taxonomy of practices of infanticide on plantations:

"There is no happiness in motherhood for a slave. It is little more than the expulsion of an innocent baby, who will have no chance to change its fate, into a world of slavery and abjection. Throughout my childhood, I had seen slaves kill their babies by sticking a long thorn into the still viscous-like egg of their heads, by cutting the umbilical cords with a poison blade, or else abandoning them at night in a place frequented by angry spirits. Throughout my childhood I had heard slaves exchange formulas for potions, baths, and injections that *sterilize the womb forever and turn it into a tomb lined with a scarlet shroud.*"¹⁷ (50)

This traumatic scene mirrors the "primal scene" of Aunt Hester's screams in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), evoked by Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjugation* (1997) and then poet and theorist Fred Moten in *In the Break* (2003). According to Hartman (and following her logic, Douglass), the slave is born (at least) twice—once, from a womb, and second, as a slave—as a result of witnessing the "centrality of violence" in slave life (1). The

¹⁷ Emphasis my own.

“terrible spectacle” of this scene is constituted not only through violence done onto the child in question, but also through the forced spectatorship of another’s abjection, specifically that of a woman (1). Hartman borrows the lexicon of reproduction to describe the ‘birth’ (or perhaps social death) of the slave-subject:

“Douglass identifies it [witnessing Hester’s screams] as an original generative act equivalent to the statement “*I was born.*” The *passage through the blood-stained gate* is an inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved. In this regard, it is *a primal scene*. By this I mean that the terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject and demonstrates that to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another; this is confirmed by the event’s placement in the opening chapter on *genealogy*.”¹⁸
(1)

The womb functions here as a graphic metaphor (“passage through the blood-stained gate”) for the ‘birth’ of the slave’s ‘death-in-life’ through the scream, which collapses the distance between symbolic and material (1).

In *In the Break*, Fred Moten in turn picks up this theoretical gauntlet by positing Aunt Hester’s screams as the “commodity’s speech,” an argument that critiques Marx’s assumption that the commodity is silent: “...the real event of the commodity’s speech, itself broken by the irreducible materiality—the broken and irreducible maternity—of the commodity’s scream.” (12) The commodity’s speech (read: the slave’s scream) is defined by its relationship to reproduction, to

¹⁸ Emphasis my own.

its condition as “unavoidably reproducible and reproductive,” to the extent that the “commodity’s scream” is at once “material” and “maternal” (4, 12). The scream, according to Moten, is part of a tripartite relationship that again reflects the primal scene of Goody Glover’s death and Tituba’s scream in *I, Tituba*: “imagine what cuts and anticipates Marx, remembering that the object resists, the commodity shrieks, the audience participates” (Moten 12). In the context of Tituba’s public scene of alienation—in which Goody Glover is hanged, Tituba screams, and the audience responds with curiosity and joy—Condé constructs a primal scene that mirrors the loss of her mother and inaugurates Tituba’s social death.

Moten also depends on the lexicon of reproduction to understand Aunt Hester’s screams as evidence of both the slave’s abjection and resistance. Borrowing Jacques Derrida’s neologism “invagination,” Moten stitches together his reading of the scream as a “radically exterior auralty that disrupts and resists certain formations of identity” and the black maternal (“maternal estrangement and the thwarted romance of the sexes”) as the cut that predicts and resists Marx (6-7). The scream, which Moten reads as evidence of the “object’s resistance,” collapses the space between the material and metaphorical by “ruptur[ing] two circles, the familial and the hermeneutic”; elsewhere, Moten formulates this more directly—“enslavement—and the resistance to enslavement... is a being maternal

that is indistinguishable from a being material” (14-16). In the past, present and future, Tituba faces literal death—the hangings of her mother, Goody Glover, and Tituba herself—as well as the social death of slavery that defines this death-world, viscerally experiencing Achille Mbembe’s assertion that “slave life, in many ways, in a form of death-in-life” (*Necropolitics* 75). In this memory-premonition, which detaches the present from linear time and collapses the metaphorical grammar of the womb with its material repercussions, in which Tituba faces her own death-in-life, she chooses a different formulation of death-in-life for her child—revolt in the form of infanticide. She is confronted with the memory her mother’s seemingly pointless (and yet generative) revolt-in-death while filled with her own “powerless rage,” which motivates the weaponization of her own womb as both resistance and care.

Tituba's *cri*, then, takes on a slightly different form than that of Douglass, Hartman, and Moten; Tituba's *cri* is inflected by its Caribbean inheritances as well, most notably from Aimé Césaire. In his first play, *Et les chiens se taisaient*, Césaire paradoxically presents the most famous *cri* of his oeuvre. This play recounts the life of a revolutionary man, narrated at the moment of his death. He re-experiences his hesitations, impulses, dreams, defeats, and victories: first, the commencement of his heroic arc and his turn towards solitude; next, his spiritual struggle against the emotive forces of the past; finally, in the third act, his

confrontation with death, in which his heroic strength stems from a deep connection with the earthly nature of being. In the most famous quote from *Et les chiens se taisaient*—and perhaps of Césaire's career—the Rebel declares, "And I shall utter the great black scream so forcefully that the foundations of the world will tremble"¹⁹ (252). The Rebel's *cri* conveys anger and horror, but also represents the voice of the colonized as they await their liberation—that is, the spirit of a warrior whose weapon is his voice, his *cri*. Césaire's *cri* also comes and goes throughout his oeuvre.

We could read the previous quote as a companion quote to the equally famous quote from *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, "for a screaming human being is not a dancing bear..." (95). However, the more crucial evocation of the *cri* in *Cahier* can be found at the beginning:

" And in this inert town, this boisterous crowd whose cry is so shockingly displaced, like this town from its movement, from its meaning, oblivious, displaced from its true cry, the sole cry that you would have wanted to hear because you feel it is unique to this town; because you feel it dwells within some deep inner refuge of darkness and pride; in this inert town, this crowd displaced from its cry of hunger, of poverty, of revolt, of hate; this crowd so eerily talkative and silent." (79)

In this passage, Césaire stages the paradox of the divergent cries that haunt "this inert town"—the first, the cry of "this crowd displaced from its cry of hunger, of

¹⁹ "Et je pousserai d'une telle raideur le grand cri nègre/ que les assises du monde en seront ébranlées." (Césaire, *The Complete Poetry* 152).

poverty, of revolt, of hate” and the second, the “true cry, the sole cry that you would have wanted to hear because you feel it is unique to this town” (79). The cry itself is born from a sonic paradox, the fusion of noise and silence, of uproar and muteness, mediated by a “crowd” that is both present and absent. The repetition of “displaced” suggests that this crowd experienced a cataclysmic split that separated them from “some deep refuge of shadow and pride” (79). That is to say, the cry (or cries)—which exist only in the fading reverberations of echoes in this stanza—are the trace of a profound alienation. For Césaire, the first cry “of hunger, of misery, of revolt, of hatred” functions as a first act, “a primal scene” according to Saidiya Hartman, a cry that marks the passage into subjugation, while the second cry, the true cry, corresponds more clearly to that “great black scream” that would change the world (252). Tituba’s scream instigates the stakes of both of these screams—the scream of the enslaved that refuses to be mediated into spectacle, reduced to a “dancing bear,” and yet this scream also inaugurates a self-consciousness and sovereignty over her body (95).

The public, primal scene of Tituba’s scream is immediately juxtaposed with a private scene of palpable transgression, Tituba’s confident decision to kill her child and reject the maternity that is indispensable to and indistinguishable to the commodity’s legibility under racialized bio-capitalism. The apposition of these two scenes viscerally demonstrates the stakes of spectatorship, harshly

impugning the voyeuristic gaze of the audience (understood here as the consent of the governed) and then following it with a "palpable aesthetic of transgression," to quote Gladys Francis, which models a praxis of consciousness witnessing instead of sterile spectatorship. The odious description of her abortion mirrors the scene of Emma's, overlapping sensory details with human, animal, and plant imagery that deviates from the expected representation of birth/abortion and "[creates] tangibility for the black female body's experience and [transforms] the immaterial into a tangible historicity that challenges the material archive" (Francis, *Odious Caribbean Women* xix).

"In Barbados, where I knew every plant by heart, I would have had no difficulty getting rid of an unwanted fruit. But what could I do here in Boston?... That night, my baby was carried out of my womb in a flow of black blood. I saw him wave his arms like a tadpole in distress and I burst into tears." (50-52)

Unlike Martine, Fifie, and the mute woman, despite feeling secure that she "had acted for the best," Tituba mourns and is haunted by the specter of her unborn child. Tituba insists that "the cry uttered by Goody Glover setting off along the corridor of death came from the bowels of [her] child, tortured by the same society and sentenced by the same judges" (52). The overlapping of Abena, Goody Glover, and Tituba's child point explicitly to the inherited and inevitable inheritances (social death and abjection) of *partus sequitur ventrem*. Tituba's following infanticide can be read a reclamation of a kind of maternal desire by

excluding her child from this self-fulfilling prophecy. Similarly, Mara Dukats claims that "... Tituba's story is not a rejection of maternity. Although she never gives birth, Tituba's story is one of maternal desire" (746).

Tituba's maternal desire recurs throughout *Moi, Tituba*, especially after her murder of her child. In the next pages, Condé includes the full text of Tituba's "lament for her lost child," a speech act that reverses and unravels the route of Tituba's *cri*:

"The moonstone dropped into the water,
Into the waters of the river,

And my fingers couldn't reach it,
Woe is me!
The moonstone has fallen.
Sitting on a rock on the riverbank

I wept and I lamented.
Oh, softly shining stone,
Glimmering at the bottom of the water.
The hunter passed that way

With his bow and arrows.
'Why are you crying, my lovely one?'
'I'm crying because my moonstone
Lies at the bottom of the water.'
'If it is but that, my lovely, I will help you.'
But the hunter dived and was drowned." (Condé 55)

Tituba's lament, which is both poem and song, marks a distinct trajectory in her identity formation, distancing Tituba from Martine and Emma, whose maternal desires were fleeting and troubled—which is not to say she is any less monstrous

or witchy or any more of a mother. In her lament, her unborn child is reborn as a moonstone, soft and shining, out of reach and trapped in the depths of water, recreating a distinctly Caribbean aesthetic of water as a burial ground:

“As Anny Curtius highlights in her work *Symbioses d’une mémoire, manifestations religieuses et littératures de la Caraïbe*, the waters of the transatlantic crossing are both the site of the burial of voices and bodies and also the transshipment routes, marking the passage from one ontological space to one that is unrepresentable for the captives (2006). The reader witnesses the repeated staging... of this dual operation: the dislocation of bodies, disontologization, and a thwarted reontologization, aborted because it ends by drowning within the waters of memory.”²⁰ (Aurélia 77)

This haunting assertion from scholar Dominique Aurélia in "Fabienne Kanor, écrivaine des passages" also elucidates the dynamics in Tituba's lament—the water, nonspecific and vast, entombs her "lost" child (as opposed to her murdered child), and the attempt to "save" him ends as such the representations of the transatlantic crossing, "by drowning within the waters of memory" (77). Even within the confines of Tituba's lament, Condé disrupts and challenges accepted archetypes of motherhood; the narrator-mother does not dive into the water herself or risk her own life to recover the moonstone-child. Tituba's self-

²⁰ Translation my own. Original: "Comme le souligne Anny Curtius dans son ouvrage *Symbioses d’une mémoire, manifestations religieuses et littératures de la Caraïbe*, les eaux de la traversée sont à la fois le lieu de l’ensevelissement des voix et des corps mais aussi les voies de transbordement, de la traversée d’un espace ontologique vers un autre non-représentable pour les captifs (2006). Le lecteur assiste à la mise en scène, répétée à travers les récits des douze captives, de cette double opération/ dislocation des corps, de désontologisme et de réontologisme avortée puisqu’elle se conclut par la noyade dans les eaux de la mémoire." (Aurélia 77)

preservation and self-love, as always, co-exist with her maternal desire, a cognitive dissonance as real as it is troubling, is itself a form of resistance and an assertion of maternal identity.

In this corpus, black Atlantic women writers insist on radical self-care as a political practice, a practice of freedom; willful self-destruction and infanticide are strategies of resistance that refuse the dispossession of the black maternal body by power relations. In this way, infanticide as resistance recalls Foucault's teachings in his interview, published as "The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom." In this dialogue, Foucault constructs a genealogy of self-care in European knowledge formations:

"In the Greco-Roman world, the care of the self was the mode in which individual freedom—or civic liberty, up to a point—was reflected (*se réfléchie*) as an ethics... Starting at a certain point, being concerned with oneself was readily denounced as a form of self-love, a form of selfishness or self-interest in contradiction with the interest to be shown in others or the self-sacrifice required. All this happened during Christianity..." (284)

According to Foucault, the stigmatization of care for the self as morally and ethically dubious is a result of Judeo-Christian narratives of self-repudiation and self-sacrifice. He contrasts this stigmatization, which extends to the modern age, with a praxis of care for the self in antiquity, in which "ethics as the conscious practice of freedom... revolved around this fundamental imperative: 'Take care of yourself'" (285). This context further clarifies infanticidal practices as extensions

of the ethos of freedom adapted by black Atlantic monstrous mothers as practices of resistance to Judeo-Christian world order and of ontological disobedience. As Foucault claims, "Care for others should not be put before the care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior" (287). The Greco-Roman praxis of self-care championed by Foucault also reflects the acceptance of death seen in this black Atlantic corpus:

"the care of the self can be centered entirely on oneself, on what one does, on the place one occupies among others. It can be centered totally on the acceptance of death... and can even, up to a point, become almost a desire for death." (289)

Notably, stemming from this reading of care for the self in antiquity, Foucault claims that claiming the self-care as an ethos is a necessarily political praxis, as "care for the self concerns all the problems of political practice and government, and so on" (291). In acts of willful infanticide and self-sacrifice, I argue we often see the prioritization of the self over the other, of the mother over the child, an order of priorities that is largely stigmatized and denounced. Yet this praxis is deeply ethical and political, charting new representations of being-with-the-self in the slave episteme.

Returning Tituba's "concern for the self," her avowal that "there is no happiness in motherhood for a slave" also prioritizes the mother's experience

alongside and above that of child, a reversal of the long-standing expectation that a mother prioritize the needs and wants of the child (Condé 50). At every chance in this work, Tituba's instincts towards the self outweigh the maternal instincts without erasing them, announcing a politics of radical care, for both herself and her child, that co-exists with a politics of revolt. Thus, I suggest an amendment of Dukat's assertion by arguing that Tituba's story is a rejection of maternity *and* one of maternal desire; that her rejection of maternal makes possible separation between the maternal and reproduction, non-biological kinship that disrupts biocapitalism. By refusing the kind of motherhood mapped out by the slave episteme, Tituba dissects sexuality, self-love, and biological reproduction from the concatenated knot created by the slave episteme; she carves out the reproductive out of slavery and the maternal out of the woman, creating an archetype of both motherhood and identity that resist biological essentialism.

This chapter begins with the last sentence of Évelyne Trouillot's *Rosalie, l'infâme*: "May I find the courage to honor my promise: Creole child who still lives in me, you will be born free and rebellious, or you will not be born at all" (129). Storytellers litter the pages of *Rosalie, l'infâme*, and many of them tell Lisette stories of women who "simply could not breathe [in slavery]" (18). The former overseer Michaud related the story of Arcinte, who had tried to run away twice and suffered two miscarriages before being caught running away while pregnant

for the third time (18). This time, Michaud is driven to self-mutilation after witnessing Arcinte's "cry" — "a cry that begged for madness to destroy her" — and claims "[he] knew that every fiber of her being was weeping for her lost child. Her child was already a slave and punished before birth" (18-19). This story, narrated by Michaud, is mirrored in the tragic story of Gracieuse, the master's mistress who refused to birth children into slavery, claiming that "chains have no color" (93). The toll of seven abortions, most of which she bore without any medical attention or care, cost Gracieuse her life, an equation that she seems to accept as the only form of agency she can exert over her body, life, and afterlives. The reality of Gracieuse's unbearable burden is related by Ma Augustine and foreshadows the terrible story that others hinted at throughout the novel.

Finally, at the end of the novel, Ma Augustine tells Lisette the hauntingly impactful story of her great-aunt Brigitte, another woman who could not breathe in slavery, who could never be tamed and whose body had been violated by their master:

"Brigitte... had killed seventy babies. At their birth she inserted a pin through the soft spot in their skull. They died from trismus soon after. No one suspected the midwife, who was always ready to lend a hand. She never regretted what she did... She declared to the judges that it was her duty as a Negress free of mind and soul to release 'these young creatures from this shameful condition called slavery.'" (120)

Brigitte is a figure of revolt, a dangerous and tough mother who had lost her sons when being captured. Her motivations for infanticide, like Tituba's are complex and dual-faceted; when asked about the cord that represented each baby she killed, she answered "'It's both my mercy and my hell'" (117). After turning herself in, she proudly pronounces that she was duty-bound to save the unborn children from slaves from their impending servitude, and her sisters reflect that they "who knew her, should have suspected that she would not have accepted her status as a slave washerwoman on the Montreuil plantation without doing something about it" (119). The construction of Brigitte's temperament is careful and deliberate; she is not simply motivated by a sense of mercy for unborn, soon to be enslaved children. Her sisters recall that she exercised a spiteful power over their master, despite her enslavement; "he was afraid of her... but he couldn't do without her" (116). In Augustine's retelling, Brigitte sees Montreuil's need as weakness and capitalizes on it, even barring him from "visiting his wife's bed" (116). Thus, Brigitte's motivations are also born of care for herself—a spiteful dedication to revenge and resistance; her illicit and brazen acts of infanticide epitomize a dual praxis of revolt and of care. As a practice of revolt, Brigitte's repeated practice of infanticide can be read as an spiteful (and successful) form of theft that disrupts the chain of reproduction and (dis)possession in the slave episteme.

As Banu Bargu makes clear, “as every form of power involves a counterpower, the biosovereign assemblage, too, creates its own forms of resistance” (53). Thus, the necropolitical assemblage of slavery and *partus sequitur ventrem*, founded as they were on the commodification of the black reproductive, enabled and obliged black women to invent new forms of counterpower and resistance, from the refusal of maternity to the weaponization of the womb. Per Foucault, if capitalism is the reigning structure of power, then refusal (particularly the refusal to work or strike) becomes a form of counter-power. According to this logic, refusal actively disrupts the mechanisms of production in which the subject is defined through the relationship of her body to the extraction of labor-power, so the striker, who refuses to work, “escape[s] being co-opted into the [sovereign] assemblage and destabilize[s] the assemblage itself” (Bargu 85).

Foucault continues this thread of analysis in *The Punitive Society*:

“...anything that may affect not only the accumulated capital of bourgeois wealth, but *the worker’s body itself as labor-power, anything that may steal it from use by capital, will be considered as that infra-legal illegalism, the great immorality, on which capitalism will try to get a hold: an illegalism that is not a breach of the law, but a way of stealing the condition of profit.*”²¹ (173)

²¹ Emphasis my own.

This lecture further explains how the threat of illegalism is constituted by the refusal to work, which denies the capitalist injunction to reduce the worker's body to labor-power: "this illegalism essentially consists in refusing to apply this body, this force to the apparatus of production... the refusal to offer these arms, this body, this strength on the labor market..." (187). In the primarily European contexts that Foucault studies, the refusal to work (the strike) "steals" the condition of possibility for profit by interrupting the chain of labor that powers the means of production, and as a result this refusal (strike) resists capitalism itself. In the context of the slave episteme, in which life itself has been extracted as value from the slave's body, the refusal to live in a "social order that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible" (Campt 25), resists "*this kind of individuality* which has been imposed" (Foucault, "The Subject and Power" 216). In the case of Brigitte, her practice of infanticide interrupts the supply chains for the masters' use of slaves as labor-power; she is not only destroying the property of the plantation owners but also preventing access to their self-reproducing labor force. Brigitte is attacking the infernal logics and calculi that have justified and her perpetuated her social death and reproductive alienation; in doing so, she inaugurates infanticide as a practice and politics of resistance by seizing the means of reproducing the means and relations of production, materially and symbolically.

However, as we see in her testimony and in Lisette's takeaway from her story, like all the monstrous mothers who came before her in this chapter, Brigitte cannot be stereotyped or reduced to a one-dimensional villain or a caricature of revolt. Her ethos of revolt coexists with her love for her niece, her dedication to her family, and her commitment to spare the next generation the experience of abject social death forced on herself and her own loved ones. More accurately, these two impulses don't just coexist with each other but also mutually reinforce each other in an endless figure eight—her politics of revolt, seen in the practice of infanticide as necropolitical resistance, is motivated by her politics of care, and that politics of care is accomplished through her politics of revolt. Through her weaponization of the womb, Brigitte invents a new grammar of ethics and resistance, reappropriating the necropolitical inheritances of the slave episteme.

4. unsettling the womb

*"I turned toward paradises lost to him and his kin,
and there, lulled by the ebb and flow of a tireless
thought, I nurtured the wind, I unloosed the
monsters and I heard rising from the other shore of
the catastrophe, the river of turtledoves and
savannah clover that I always carry in my inmost
being at a depth inverse to the height of the
twentieth floor of the most supercilious edifices and
as a talisman against the putrefying power of
crepuscular settings, patrolled night and day by an
accursed venereal sun."*

— Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*

*"With her 'monstrous and unnatural deed,' then,
the infanticidal enslaved mother signifies one
example of the political potentials of 'claiming the
monstrosity (of a female with the potential to
'name')."*

— Sara Clarke Kaplan, *the black reproductive*

In Marie-Célie Agnant's *Le Livre d'Emma*, grotesque and monstrous

mothers rewrite the grammars of maternal desire and longing, unraveling the hierarchy of being and the assumption of human supremacy:

"On the day in question, I am trying to get into the cemetery, when, through a hole in the fence, I glimpse a rat as big as a puppy. For sure, it must feed on the corpses, like Mr. Duplan's, that they exhume to steal their clothes and don't bother to rebury. I was there contemplating all these things when I saw the rat arch its back against the wall and take its teat in its paws to give to a baby rat that grabs onto it. The little one drinks gluttonously, while squealing and moaning. And without knowing why, I suddenly feel sad, and I am envious of the baby rat and its little moans of pleasure. It's definitely that evening, on returning home, that I start to tell

that story, to tell it out loud to myself, with the hope that Fifie and Aunt Grazie will hear me..." (102)

This passage is a moment of monstrosity, where the boundaries between decay, survival, and intimacy collapse. Emma's attempt to enter the cemetery is interrupted by the sight of a rat, a scavenger that thrives on the remnants of human death. But her gaze, as spectator, does something unexpected—it shifts from horror to longing as the rat, no longer just a grotesque scavenger, becomes a figure of maternal care. Its act of nursing, described in tactile and intimate terms, unsettles Emma's perception of overlapping human and animal abjection—this description evokes uneasiness and a sense of trespassing as she witnesses the imbrication of pleasure and nursing. The image of the baby rat, drinking “gluttonously” while “squealing and moaning,” is disturbing not only because of its setting—this perverse moment of nurturance occurring against the backdrop of a defiled graveyard—but also because it elicits an involuntary emotional response, an unmet yearning for an intimacy that is at once instinctive and impossible (102).

Having been unsettled, Emma's gaze shifts from one of voyeuristic horror to one of conscientious witnessing. Emma does not simply observe this unsettling scene; she carries it home, unable to leave it behind. The act of narrating—to “tell that story, to tell it out loud to myself”—becomes a

compulsion, a means of processing a moment that resists easy categorization.

The hope that Fifie and Aunt Grazie will overhear suggests that storytelling here is not just an act of remembering, but an attempt at forging connection, at making an unspeakable recognition legible to others. In this passage, the monstrous and the tender, the abject and the intimate, blur into one another. It is a meditation on deprivation, on the ways care and consumption intertwine in spaces of violence, and on how storytelling itself becomes a mechanism for survival in a world where even the dead are not allowed to rest. This unsettling scene questions the overrepresentation of the human defined in opposition to the animal(ized)/other by disrupting "natural" senses and responses to maternity.

In the context of the black Atlantic, incomparable writers such as Edwidge Danticat, Marie-Célie Agnant, Maryse Condé, Évelyne Trouillot, Simone Schwarz-Bart, and Fabienne Kanor deploy strategies of unsettling to challenge the coloniality of being. In an interview with francophone Caribbean literary critic and translator J. Michael Dash, Trouillot revealed her writing is guided by this disturbed feeling—"I feel that there is something deep, something to search through, something that is a bit disturbing and that guided me in my writing" (Dash, "Roundtable" 193). In the hands of these writerly women, to unsettle is thus not to pronounce theories or to propose solutions, but rather to lean into the disturbing and to question with an aesthetic dimension of wrongness,

uneasiness, and discomfort. To unsettle is to startle a spectator out of apathetic voyeurism, in part by provoking a sick feeling of dizziness, of nausea, of contagious complicity.

Unsettling is more than a negation; it's an invocation of energy and movement; it elevates, awakens, and arouses; it is an act (or an enaction) of *poiēsis* in black, to borrow the construction of Black Studies author and professor R.A. Judy. It lifts the anchor of the slave ship, unmooring the vessel and interrupting its immutable stillness without charting a new course or a setting a new destination. These rhetorical strategies of unsettling are ontological challenges to "the coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom" that draw attention to the biologics of the slave episteme and gesture towards new genres of being, a challenge that "is not only incomprehensible to ontology; [but also] also articulates a way of being human that is nonontological (Judy 21). These writers do so through specific registers of aesthetics, by conjuring of the odious, materializing the maternal, re-appropriating the monstrous, summoning the spectral, and killing kinship.

These authors unsettle the womb by drawing attention to the origin stories of slavery *as such*, by staging disruptive birth scenes, by interrupting the overdetermined narratives of motherhood/maternity, by rewriting the symbolic life/death code of the slave episteme, by inventing new genres of being —

ultimately, by revealing and insisting on the creolized "hybridity of humanness—that we are simultaneously storytelling and biological beings" (29). These strategies of unsettling, which sidestep one-dimensional protest or negation, are decolonial strategies that dissect the *bios / mythoi* logic of biological reproduction in the slave episteme in the style of Mignolo's *decolonial scientia*: "To delink and decolonize means to adumbrate what was hidden and ignored—and to do this is to recognize, extend, and invent new concepts" (Mignolo, "Sylvia Wynter" 115). In fact, I would argue that one must unsettle the womb first, in order to unsettle narratives of human representation. These writers reveal the codes of Man and the Human as "adaptive truths" rather than natural truths, and the monstrous mothers/defiant daughters they imagine and perform a praxis of "epistemic disobedience" in every sense (Wynter, "Unsettling.." 317; Mignolo, "Sylvia Wynter" 107).

unsettling the stomach and the episteme

In her ground-breaking essay "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," writer and theorist Sylvia Wynter traces the historical unfolding of the overrepresentation of man and counsels that "any attempt to unsettle the coloniality of power will call for the unsettling of this overrepresentation" (260). Given the persistence in this overrepresentation of man, Wynter calls for a new

"genre of the human" that recognizes multiple ways of being and knowing, drawing from different cultural and epistemological traditions, a shift in representation that would require dismantling dominant systems of knowledge and power (260). In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which black Atlantic writers have unsettled the genre of man, imagining new ways of sensing, knowing, and believing that argue for a new grammar and politics of being.

This investigation begins with the question, what does it mean to unsettle as a praxis? To unsettle has as many, if not more, meanings as the verb to settle:

"Settle... I. To put in place; to place or be placed so as to remain; to (cause to) take up residence, and related senses... II. To (cause to) descend or sink down; to lower... III. To come to rest after flight or movement... IV. To render or become stable or permanent; to fix or become fixed in a certain condition... V. To come or bring to a state of stillness after perturbation.... VI. To decide or resolve; to eliminate uncertainty or end dispute about (something)." ("Settle, V.")

To *unsettle*, then, is to remove from a position of comfort or habit, to displace, to misplace, to raise up, to lift, to disturb from rest (possibly into flight or motion), to render unstable and impermanent, to break, to dislodge, to detach, to sever, to perturb, to agitate, to upset, to introduce uncertainty, to dispute, to refuse, to reject, to hesitate, to delay, to complicate, to obfuscate. Borrowing from the field of sociology, unsettling energizes and enables agency, while destabilizing and subverting structure. In "Unsettling Sovereignty," sociologist Yarimar Bonilla proposes a similar definition of unsettling:

"What is unsettled is not necessarily removed, toppled, or returned to a previous order but is fundamentally brought into question. The move to unsettle sovereignty—to trouble its presumptions, question its origins, and explore its alternatives—should thus be tied to a broader unsettling of [disciplinarity] as a whole." (335)

What interests me in the many valences of unsettling is the lack of inertia, certainty, and credibility—the embrace of unknowability and irresolution as well as its cascading consequences, bringing an entire discursive statement and structure of power into question. Reflecting decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo's description of the epistemologies of *les damnés*²², strategies of unsettling "do not seek to arrive at a perfect or true definition of the human, for there is no Human 'out there' beyond the Western imperial concept of Man / Human from the Renaissance on" (Mignolo, "Sylvia Wynter" 108). Rather than a teleological trajectory towards a solution or answer, unsettling asks questions and thrives in the suspense of uncertainty.

²² The term "*les damnés*" (the damned) is a central concept in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la Terre*, 1961). It refers to the colonized, the oppressed, and the dehumanized people living under colonial rule. Fanon portrays them as the most exploited and marginalized under the colonial system, doomed to violence, poverty, and systemic dehumanization. This term is picked up and cited often by scholars Sylvia Wynter and Walter Mignolo, among many others.

In this essay, riffing off the influential works of disruptive thinkers such as Anibal Quijano²³ and Walter Mignolo²⁴ as well as Frantz Fanon and Michel Foucault, Wynter traces the epistemic shift in representations of the human, beginning in medieval Europe when the genre of the human was based on Christian theological ideas (a "theocentric" model that ultimately yields what she calls the "invention of Man1"), and pausing in the European Renaissance when the rise of humanism and Darwinism led to a "biocentric" model of the human (which in turn triggers the "invention of Man2") (263-264). Wynter's critical intervention (one of many) in her record of this genealogy is her argument that these epistemic shifts are not only epistemological shifts, replacing one order of knowledge with another, but also ontological shifts with radical consequences for the category of man and its correlative conception of being:

"That, therefore, these shifts in epistemes were not only shifts with respect to each episteme's specific order of knowledge/truth, but were also shifts in what can now be identified as the 'politics of being'; that is, as a politics that is everywhere fought over what is to be the descriptive statement, the governing sociogenic principle, instituting of each genre of the human."
(318)

²³ Anibal Quijano (1928–2018) was a Peruvian sociologist and decolonial theorist best known for developing the concept of "coloniality of power." His work critically examines how colonialism continues to shape global structures of power, knowledge, and race, even after formal decolonization. He is considered one of the foundational thinkers of decolonial studies and Latin American critical thought.

²⁴ Walter Mignolo (1941-) is an Argentinian scholar, literary theorist, and decolonial thinker known for his work on coloniality, modernity, and epistemic decolonization. His work builds upon Anibal Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power" and expands it into broader critiques of knowledge, language, and modernity.

Wynter further intervenes in this genealogy of thought by arguing, quite convincingly, that the epistemic shifts between Man1 and Man2 are not quite as drastic a rupture as past scholars have theorized. Instead, she reveals that while "the conceptual break made with Greco-Roman cum Judeo-Christian premise of nonhomogeneity of substance, and thereby of an ontological distinction between... heaven and earth" did make the advent of the natural sciences possible, that ontological distinction—what Wynter calls the "space of otherness"—was then mapped onto another signifier of difference and hierarchy, that of race:

“That is, as a lawlike part of the systemic representational shift being made out of the order of discourse that had been elaborated on the basis of the Judeo-Christian Spirit/Flesh organizing principle (one in whose logic the premise of nonhomogeneity, articulating its master code of symbolic life and death, had been mapped onto the physical cosmos) to the new rational/irrational organizing principle and master code. And as one whose foundational premise of nonhomogeneity, which was now to be mapped onto a projected, ostensibly divinely created difference of substance between rational humans and irrational animals, would also come to be mapped at another “space of Otherness” level. This level was that of a projected Chain of Being comprised of differential/hierarchical degrees of rationality (and thereby, as shown in the quote from Sepúlveda, of humanity) between different populations, their religions, cultures, forms of life; in other words, their modes of being human. And while the West placed itself at the apex, incorporating the rest (the majority of whom it would come to dominate in terms of their differential degrees of distance from, or nearness to, its now hegemonic, secularizing, and single own), and was to legitimate its relation of dominance over them all in the terms of its single culture’s

adaptive truth-for, it was to be the figure of the Negro (i.e., the category comprised by all peoples of black African hereditary descent)...²⁵ (300)

This new representation, which Wynter calls upon as an "unsettling" of the "coloniality of power," has two principal purposes: first, to reveal the biocentric episteme as such (since one of its key stratagems is to 'repress all knowledge of the fact that [it]... is a descriptive statement,' i.e. a sociogenic development rather than phylogenic or ontogenic) (325-326) and second to provide new and counter-representations of being, independent from its current Overrepresentation as Man(2):

"... because it is this premise that underlies the interlinked nature of what I have defined (on the basis of Quijano's founding concept of the coloniality of power) as the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom, with the logical inference that one cannot 'unsettle' the 'coloniality of power' without a redescription of the human outside the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human, Man, and its over-representation..." (268)

In his essay "Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human" and throughout his oeuvre, Mignolo outlines *how* strategies of unsettling decolonize the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom by "not simply [protesting] the contents of imperial coloniality [but also] delinking... from the knowledge systems we take for granted... and practicing epistemic disobedience" (115).

²⁵ Emphasis my own.

Mignolo calls this the project of *decolonial scientia* and summarizes the "three types of tasks" summoned by *decolonial scientia*, all three of which are challenges taken up by black Atlantic literature:

"Decolonial scientia puts forth three types of tasks. First, it reimagines rather than denies the links between geo-history and knowledge and between biography and knowledge. Second, it explores the consequences that Western expansion (today called 'globalization') had and continues to have for the population and the environment... Third, *decolonial scientia* generates knowledge to build communities in which life (in general) has priority over economic gains, economic growth, and economic development." (118)

In this chapter, I will think through the ways black Atlantic literature reimagines the bond between knowledge production and biology, viscerally reveals the consequences of the biologics of the slave episteme, and invites/invents new genres of being/becoming human, arguing that in doing so this corpus de-biologizes and thus decolonizes the episteme. I'm specifically interested in the ways in which these writers respond to and construct the problem-space²⁶ of the womb/maternal as a poetics of Wynter's *bios / mythoi*, employing what Wynter calls upon as "Césaire's science of the Word" to reveal how colonial narratives of the maternal womb (of which *partus sequitur ventrem* partakes) mask the biologics

²⁶ The concept of "problem-space" originates from David Scott, a Jamaican-born historian and postcolonial theorist, particularly in his book *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (2004). Scott defines a problem-space as a historically specific configuration of questions, debates, and conceptual frameworks that structure how people think about political and social issues. It is not just a set of problems but the discursive and ideological terrain in which problems are posed and answered.

of consumption and extraction—the biocentric genre of human—in reproductive slavery, which are enacted in and by the flesh:

“Our third and hybrid level of existence, as shown in these cases, is therefore a domain specific to Aimé Césaire’s proposed new science of the Word... the study of nature, in this context, will now be specifically a study of the *implementing bios* agency of the human brain. Here the 'first set of instructions' (genetic codes) and the 'second set of instructions' (nongenetic codes) emerge; the study of the Word in this light is the study of an agency that functions according to the laws of nature and its genetically programmed 'first set of instructions' (biological genetic codes) whose role in this *bios / mythoi* hybrid context is to neurochemically implement the 'second set of instructions' (nongenetically chartered origin stories and myths)... This implementation occurs according to the 'laws of nature' first set of instructions, with the second set of instructions, thereby, being alchemically made flesh!” (Wynter and McKittrick 26-27)

I am arguing that this unsettling aesthetic dimension is a distinctly Caribbean, creolized response to the call to decolonize, influenced by the "brutal" and "intimate" exercises of power in the slave episteme:

“... unlike some conceptions of hybridity, which consciously reach for fusion and mixture in their accounts, *the process of creolization is inflected with brutality, produced by the excess of relation, and evidences living a life in the context of intimate and contradictory relations of domination and subjection. Creolization is an altering of the human that concerns itself with surviving a process of 'mutual mutations.'* ... the brutalities which produce the Caribbean, and by extension the Americas, also generate the production of new modes of human life, even today...”²⁷ (Walcott 188)

²⁷ Emphasis my own.

monstrous maternity

In *Laboring Women*, Jennifer Morgan centers the experience of childbirth as a foundational scene of the slave episteme, alongside the "lash or branding iron," drawing the reader's attention to the way childbirth became part of the ruling grammar of slavery:

"childbirth became part of a series of symbolic icons mobilized by slaveowners that ultimately attempted to sever a black woman's hold on her [sovereignty]... Childbirth, then, needs to stand alongside the more ubiquitously evoked scene of violence and brutality at the end of a slaveowner's lash or branding iron." (105)

Here, Morgan prompts us to consider the scene of childbirth as a primal scene in the way of Hartman, as a "spectacle" through which the enslaved person comes to be aware of their enslavement (read: unfreedom) through shocking violence and a "re-birth" (Hartman 1). Similarly, in her monograph *Becoming Human*, researcher and theorist Zakiyyah Jackson takes this logic one step further, reminding us that birth scenes constitute primal scenes not only of slave abjection but also of defining the parameters of the human:

"black female flesh persistently functions as the limit case of 'the human' and is its matrix-figure. This is largely explained by the fact that, historically, the delineation between species has fundamentally hinged on the question of reproduction; in other words, the limit of the human has been determined by how the means and scene of birth are interpreted." (4)

In this quotation, Jackson argues that Black female flesh has historically served as both the boundary and foundation of the category of the human, suggesting that the concept of humanity itself has been structured around questions of reproduction, making Black women's bodies central to defining, yet also excluding, certain groups from full recognition as human. The emphasis on how "the means and scene of birth are interpreted" underscores that it is not just the biological fact of birth but its social construction that determines who is recognized as fully human, explicitly taking up Wynter's challenge to reveal the dual bios / mythoi nature of the slave episteme (4). By emphasizing how this process (what Wynter calls "overrepresentation") is shaped by racialized and gendered interpretations of birth and reproduction, Jackson invites us to re-read and re-interpret scenes of birth and reproduction, such as the scene of Emma's birth in *Le Livre d'Emma*.

In this haunting work, Agnant reconstructs the scene of childbirth as a primal scene, calling on the dressings of speculative fiction to stage and expose how slavery's dependence on "the speculative value of a reproducing labor force" distorted the fundamental meaning, significance, and experience of reproduction, e.g. maternity, parturition, and motherhood (Morgan, *Laboring Women* 10). Later, Emma shares her understanding of the conditions of her birth in a passage that reflects Agnant's odious description of Emma's attempted

abortion as well as the odious taxonomies seen in *Moi*, *Tituba* and *Breath, Eyes,*

Memory:

“I finally understand that Fifie trembles from despair when I arrive, at seeing the evening brings me back alive, and that, with all her heart, she hopes that one day I will end up at the bottom of the cliffs. Before I was born, she must have tried everything to get rid of me: baths of smelly leaves, macerations of barks, long needles, metal hooks, bamboo stalks. Invincible, I clung unto her womb with my lips, those two suction cups that she can’t stand.” (105)

The grotesque and monstrous birth scene that follows, then, is most likely the result of a semi-successful, self-induced abortion; Fifie's motivations, as always, are lacking the affect of mercy or care seen in other monstrous mothers. Her motivations are the most extreme expression of the care of the self and a challenge to the sensibilities of readers and spectators who would denounce such an "evil" ethics. The scene of childbirth, accordingly, is a scene of aborted infanticide and the body in pain, one that challenges the limits of human representation:

"The morning that my sisters and I free ourselves from Fifie's womb, that same bluish dawn stretches out over the mountains surrounding Grand-Lagon. We are five, five children all at once, five stillborn girls. What a struggle Fifie must have had to rip us out of her womb..

On our bit of island, our collective birth causes quite a commotion. The midwife puts all of us together on a large piece of cloth. She knots the ends to take us to the garbage dump or perhaps to a hole hollowed out between the roots of a tree. But at the moment that she is about to leave the room, I let out a piercing screech. In the pastures, the cows stop grazing, turn tail and run; the birds rush back to their nests. A furious tempest rages outside. Gray thunderstorms streak across the sky. The

winds let out a sinister howl. No one remembers having seen such a violent hurricane.

... After I was born, no one could remember the name of the hurricane. According to Aunt Grazie, my screams covered the howling of all the winds put together. When the midwife realised that something was wriggling and screaming in the bunch of umbilical cords and twisted arms and legs that she had just pulled from between Fifie's bloody thighs, she stopped short, gasping. Then, digging here and there, pulling a leg from one side, from the other an arm that seemed to have been dipped in aniline, she discovered me...

'We looked like a heap of dead toads...

'There is, in Fifie's room, opposite the bed on which she lies unconscious in a pool of sticky blackish liquid, a large wardrobe of unpolished mahogany, with a plump belly like the paunch of an animal on the verge of dying. My scream, the power of my scream, makes cracks in the wood that spill onto the floor an army of startled termites. And, in spite of looking like a dead toad—that's how they described me—I already know all that, for I came into the world wearing, on my soft skull, five caul: mine plus those of my four sisters... A child born with such a crown, that's unacceptable, but a tadpole that, in the womb of its mother, already appropriates what doesn't belong to it, that is guaranteed misfortune, the promise of hell for its next of kin, a tyrannical little animal, an evil, voracious beast, with eyes and hands all over its body....

... These sticky tadpoles that we are, my sisters and I, these bits of poorly assembled flesh, vomited by a swollen red gorgon, will make her lose her taste for the living for many months." (65-70)

In this passage, the odious shares space with the monstrous; put another way, in this scene, the aesthetic of the odious (re)appropriates the monstrous in order to unsettle the human.

Monstrous, which has been associated with birth since the sixteenth century, can refer to "a person, animal, or plant; abnormally formed" such as a monstrous deformity, a monstrous birth, "issue from the bellie of theyr mother

monstrous and deformed" ("Monstrous, Adj., Adv., Int., N."). Furthermore, monster itself usually refers to "a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms"; in this context, a monstrous aesthetic trespasses distinctions between race and species, and in doing so, surpasses the human ("Monster, N., Adv., & Adj."). In *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*, Zakiyah Iman Jackson reminds us through her readings of Winthrop Jackson and Jennifer Morgan that the monstrous has been entangled with blackness since its conception, as the Western "epistemological foundation... had been already circulating tales of mythical human-animal hybrids and humanoid animals [when travel accounts of Africa began to circulate the continent in the sixteenth century]... Africa was seen as a land of new monsters" (6). Jackson insists that antiracism "relies on animal abjection [to establish] liberal humanism as the authority of being (human)" by then grafting the characteristics of abject animality onto black(ened) people; however, black cultural productions such as Agnant's *Le Livre d'Emma* feature radically imaginative representations of the human and the animal that produce "an unruly sense of being/knowing/feeling existence, one that necessarily disrupts the foundations of the current hegemonic mode of 'the human'" (2).

In *Le Livre d'Emma*, this admittedly infernal birth scene, which is the result of unsuccessful abortion methods, asks the reader to radically re-interpret not only this scene of birth, but all such scenes; it both "[reflects] abject animalized depictions of blackness [and invents] them," ultimately reinforcing flesh (not animality) as the principal material metaphor of blackness, questioning any investment (symbolic or material) in the "human," and drawing attention to the overlapping disasters of birth and weather to de-stigmatize the animal (Jackson 18). Jackson reveals three "contiguous presuppositions" that are ever-present in "epistemological project of humanistic perspective":

"first, 'the animal' lacks perspective; second, 'the African' is animal in the form of a human and, thus, is devoid of the achievement of Reason or the full realization of perspective; and third, because 'the animal' —human and nonhuman— is lacking, animality disqualifies one from ethical consideration." (60)

Agnant systematically questions and complicates each of these perfidious assumptions in this scene; first, she inverts the traditional, binaristic hierarchies of human and animal. Instead, the animals are heralds of a seemingly natural world and appear as welcome interruptions from the disturbing and odious carryings on of the humans. Outside the boundary of the birthing room, the cows and birds not only have the good sense to take shelter from the raging hurricane but also seem to be running away from Emma's unnatural and monstrous

scream, evoking the latin roots *mōnstrum* (portent) and *monēre* (to warn)

("Monster, N., Adv., & Adj.").

Inside the birthing room, where rules of physics, consciousness, and grammar are suspended as Emma narrates her own birth from memory, Agnant maintains an extended metaphor that slips back and forth between dismembered limbs, tadpoles/toads, and children/sisters to describe the state-of-being of those who are born, including Emma. This aquatic, marine comparison does not inherently conjure a sense of abjection; rather, it draws attention the physical and visual conditions of gestation and birth, "hypothesizing cross-species relationality in a way that preserves alterity" (Jackson 18). Most importantly, the consciousness witnessing called forth by this odious extended metaphor actively encourages identification with and empathy for the unfortunate tadpoles who are failed by the humans surrounding them. The termites are reasonably startled at being displaced and exposed from the only explicitly abject animal image, the "plump belly like the paunch of an animal on the verge of dying," a mahogany wardrobe rather than any of human(ish) beings in the room (62). The animal identifications in this scene do not degrade Emma's worthiness of ethical consideration; instead, it questions the utility and value of a category of being, "human," that includes such characters as Fifie and Grazie. As Jackson states, "by questioning the virtuousness of human recognition... [we can] develop a praxis

of being that is not only an alternative to the necropolitical but [also] opposes it" (18). Throughout this scene, each instance of the monstrous, the odious, and the animal serve to draw the reader's attention back to the problematic of the black maternal, reinvesting and reversing the usual symbolism and stakes of a birth scene to open space for new ontologies and cosmologies.

Conversely, the only explicitly named monster in the room is the mother, the "swollen red gorgon" who vomits up "bits of poorly assembled flesh," rather than giving birth (70). The reference to the gorgons²⁸, Greek mythological monsters with snakes for hair and a deadly glare that killed through petrification, complicates Fifie's character. Once again, Agnant evokes the odious and plays with the significance of the gaze; according to the mythology of the gorgon, the gaze of the spectator is punished and stigmatized, further constructing a "zone-of-contact" between reader and character. On some level, in this scene, the aesthetic of the monstrous surpasses a "binaristic model of human-animal relation," in which genetic co-mingling is deviant, and instead returns to its Latin origins *mōnstrum* (portent) and *monēre* (to warn), warning the reader to

²⁸ The Gorgons are figures from Greek mythology, often depicted as terrifying female creatures with snakes for hair and the power to turn anyone who gazes upon them to stone. According to classical sources, there were three Gorgon sisters: Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa. Medusa's story is particularly significant in mythological and feminist interpretations. Originally a beautiful maiden, Medusa was transformed into a monster by the goddess Athena as a punishment (or, in some versions, as a form of protection) after being assaulted by Poseidon in Athena's temple. Her image has been used both to demonize and to empower women, making her one of the most complex figures in mythology.

"beware of crossing your arms in the sterile pose of a spectator,"²⁹ lest your own humanity be upgraded to that of stone ("Monster, N., Adv., & Adj."; Césaire, *Cahier* 95). Finally, at the semantic limits of this reference, the "gorgon" is most readily recognizable as Medusa, a newly reinvested feminist symbol of violated sexuality and the reappropriation of power and violence, alluding obliquely to French feminist Hélène Cixous' iconic "Le Rire de la Méduse." While Fifie's monstrous motherhood strains the limits of empathy and affinity, Agnant constantly reminds us of Emma's abounding desire and love for her mother, insisting at each moment that Fifie is more than a stereotype, more than an innocent victim of a broken system, and more than a one-dimensional villain, not unlike Medusa herself. Despite her monstrosity, evidenced by her apparent antipathy towards her progeny, Fifie still names her daughter after her maternal ancestors, a perplexing yet poignant reminder of Fifie's complex, contradictory identity.

This birth scene has many strong elements of the supernatural and speculative, including an uncanny verisimilitude that is at once unbelievable and yet tangible, what R.A. Judy has termed "poiēsis in black" or "thinking-in-

²⁹ It is worth noting that in the full version of this famous quote, Césaire replicates the assumed hierarchy between human and animal, on the animal abjection of the "dancing bear," to convey the abjection of the black man, staying well within the bounds of the humanist ontology critiqued by Jackson.

disorder". The monstrous allows Agnant to "[articulate] a way of being that is non-ontological"; it is a nightmare of a creation story, and it demands that its reader question all preexisting assumptions about the womb and birth (Judy 256). Put another way, Agnant employs an aesthetic of the odious in order to reappropriate and reinvest the symbolism of the monstrous, denying the pressures of humanist ontology. In this primal scene, the womb is among black geographies³⁰ such as a prison and a tomb, from which Emma and her sisters must "free" themselves, as they are locked in battle with Fifie, who must "rip" them out—a visceral description that eludes any of the usual associations of birth. Emma's sisters are never human and never alive, inhuman and already dead, perhaps unlucky victims of Fifie's anti-maternal desire, they incite disgust and are destined to the same fate as the photos of Lola's dismembered body—the trash. The bodies are in parts, only identified as tadpoles or limbs, covered in oil, and Emma is still covered in amniotic tissue, begging the question, "What is the womb, and where does it end?":

"The body in pain is suspended in-between birth and death, the reality and the imagery. It is marginalized, alienated, hostile, and r/evolves inside a dystopian world. The madness that seems to possess the body in pain

³⁰ Black geography is an interdisciplinary framework that examines how Black people experience, shape, and are constrained by space and place. It challenges dominant geographic narratives that often erase or marginalize Black spatial experiences. Katherine McKittrick, a leading scholar in Black geographies, argues that geography itself has been shaped by anti-Black logics that render Black spaces invisible or degraded in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle* (2006).

serves as a possible escape, a possible space of rebirth. Thus, the transgressive in the feminine is always located inside the in-between..." (Francis 76)

Blood is blackened, everything is slick to the touch, and the cry of a newborn, a typically welcome sign of life, is an omen of evil and doom. The invocation of the monstrous is a graphic, repulsive inversion that, like all speculative fiction, dares us to see parallels in our own lives, to question our assumptions, and to imagine otherwise.

As Christina Sharpe reminds us in *Monstrous Intimacies*, the term monstrous overlaps many possible meanings, signifying not just the unnatural or strange but also the excessive and transgressive, often through a kind of hybridity not dissimilar to that hybridity championed by Caribbean theorists:

"The word *monstrous* too signifies desire and has multiple meanings that range from 'unnatural' and 'strange' to 'excessive.' From the OED: 'Of a thing (material or immaterial): deviating from the natural or conventional order; unnatural, extraordinary'; 'of a person: strange or unnatural in conduct or disposition'; 'of, relating to, or characteristic of a monster; having the appearance or nature of a monster, esp. in being hideous or frightening'; 'used as a colloquial intensifier: very great, excessive, 'tremendous.'" These monstrous intimacies also end up being interracial intimacies, as the monster is also normally part animal and part human (polygenesis), 'a mythical creature.'" (190)

Crucially, monstrosity is not just about horror but about hybridity, particularly in the context of racial and sexual intimacies. Thus, the monster, often imagined as part-human, part-animal, speaks to anxieties around polygenesis, racial

mixing, and the boundaries of the human itself. As such, the monstrous is often imbricated in imaginings and anxieties around maternity and biological reproduction, particularly for those beings from whom the appellation "human" is withheld. Indeed, in Saidiya Hartman's essay "The Belly of the World," in which she advocates for an intervention in Black Atlantic political thought that does not take into account the labors of the black mother, she conveys the same anxieties:

"It has proven difficult, if not impossible, to assimilate black women's domestic labors and reproductive capacities within narratives of the black worker, slave rebellion, maroonage, or black radicalism, even as this labor was critical to the creation of value, the realization of profit and the accumulation of capital. *It has been no less complicated to imagine the future produced by such labors as anything other than monstrous.*"³¹ (167)

Here, Hartman exposes the historical erasure of black women's domestic and reproductive labor from dominant narratives of black resistance and explicitly insists on a continuity of meaning from labor, as in "the contribution of the worker to production" as well as "the process of childbirth" ("Labour | Labor, N."). This dual sense of labor expands the interpretations of her observation that "[it] has been no less complicated to imagine the future produced by such labors as anything other than monstrous" —on the one hand, she acknowledges

³¹ Emphasis my own.

anxieties about racial mixing and the limits of humanity that tend to be typecast as monstrous (167). On the other hand, "the [monstrous] future produced by such labors" could also be the outcome of maternal and reproductive labor's erasure and absence from narratives of resistance (and History writ large) (167).

This theoretical intertwining of monstrosity and reproductivity also features in Kanor's *Poétique de la cale*, in which she also characterizes this intertwining as an unsettling. In her third path (*chemin*) of meditation, "The Bedroom and the Hold," Kanor proposes a hypothesis, that in literatures born from the womb of the hold ("*je dis que c'est l'en-cale et le hors-la-cale qui ont enfanté ces épopées*"), the enclosed and haunted space of the bedroom reconstructs the stakes and wounds of the hold:

"Here is my hypothesis: I claim that these rooms, arranged by their authors, are haunted by the ghosts of the hold, and that the protagonists who find themselves confined inside are vulnerable and necrotized beings. Whether they are unaware of it or openly claim it, they have indeed inherited the wound [*la blès*]. Transplanted into novels, they carry the hold within them. They have contracted the melancholy of the ancient, abducted captives."³² (213)

³² Translation my own. Original: "Voilà mon hypothèse : je prétends que ces chambres aménagées par leurs auteurs sont hantées par les fantômes de la cale, et que les protagonistes qui s'y retrouvent enfermées sont des êtres vulnérables et nécrosées. Qu'ils l'ignorent ou le revendiquent, il ont en effet hérité de la blès. Transplantés dans les romans, il portent en eux la cale. Ils ont contracté la mélancolie des anciens captifs déportés." (213)

This scene of haunting contrasts with earlier scenes that focused on palliative representations of the spectral (Chapter 2). While this evocation of haunting does similarly trouble the life/death binary, it materializes through contamination and wounding—creating an unsettling pall that descends over the supposed scenes of intimacy in bedrooms.

In her description of this counternarrative of bedroom intimacy in Ken McMullen's experimental film *Ghost Dance*, Kanor explicitly evokes the gaze, the spectral, the unsettling, the monstrous, and the reproductive in a bricolage of senses that disrupt easy narratives of intimacy, sexuality, and reproduction—the border gates of human signification:

"When two people make love, there are four people watching, because it is in moments of deep intimacy and vulnerability that the internalized figures of the past become present. But these four ghosts bring their own ghosts with them, and so on, and so on.

That the bedroom where 'two people make love' could be a space of endless germination and reproduction of invisible entities introduces the idea of the monstrous in the sense of something excessive (and so on, and so on) and unsettling. The unsettling aspect of this is that the ghosts watching the living couple's union do not arise from the outside world. They are creatures emerging from the lovers' past and their unconscious."³³ (219)

³³ Translation my own. Original: "Quand deux personnes font l'amour, il y a quatre personnes qui regardent, car c'est aux moments de grande intimité et de grande vulnérabilité que les personnages intériorisés du passé deviennent présents. Mais ces quatre fantômes amènent leurs propres fantômes intérieurs et ainsi de suite, et ainsi de suite.

Que la chambre où « deux personnes font l'amour » puisse être un lieu de germination et de reproduction incessante d'entités invisibles introduit l'idée du monstrueux au sens de démesuré (ainsi de suite, ainsi de suite) et d'inquiétant. L'inquiétant dans cette affaire est que les fantômes qui regardent s'accoupler les

This passage reframes intimacy in the afterlife of the Middle Passage as a haunted act, where desire is never solely shared between two but instead conjures a spectral genealogy of the past. The lovers' bed becomes a site of excess, where the unconscious births its own monstrous lineage, entangling pleasure with the unsettling presence of what has been buried but not forgotten. With Hartman, Kanor expresses the unsettling sense of anxiety produced by unchecked reproductivity; both authors grapple with the way intimacy, labor, and reproduction are haunted by histories that exceed the individual, transforming personal acts into sites of spectral return. Kanor conceptualizes intimacy as a site of haunting, where past figures emerge in moments of vulnerability, complicating the notion of the private sphere, while Hartman extends this logic to black women's reproductive labor, arguing that their historical roles have been both central to economic production and yet excluded from dominant narratives of resistance. In both cases, what is supposed to be generative—whether love or labor—becomes monstrous, excessive, and unsettling, shaped by histories of violence that refuse to disappear. The monstrous here is not just an aberration but a structuring condition, revealing

vivants ne proviennent pas du monde extérieur. Ils sont des créatures jaillies du passé et de l'inconscient des amants." (219)

how both desire and reproduction are entangled in economies of haunting, racial capitalism, and historical afterlives that persist within the most intimate spaces. As Kanor concludes, "[there] will be no triumph over the monstrous creations that both humans and the world have produced" (220).

However, against this backdrop of the monstrous as a cautionary tale or cruel consequence of trespassing normalized relations and being, black Atlantic writers also re-appropriate the monstrous, reclaiming hybridity as a way of troubling the overrepresentation of Man, an overrepresentation which is stabilized by readings of the non-human as aberrant. In Kanor's *Humus*, this reclamation is most clear in the story of the-one-who-flies (la volante), a captive woman of the hold who bears a marked similarity to Cecile Fatiman, the mambo who presided over the infamous Bois Caïmon ceremony that in turn initiated the Haitian Revolution, or so the origin story³⁴ goes. The story of the-one-who-flies begins in the abject environment of the hold, but quickly slips through the

³⁴ A Vodou priestess (mambo), Cecile Fatiman was one of the key figures at the famous Bois Caïman ceremony in August 1791, where enslaved Africans gathered to forge a spiritual and political pact against French colonial rule. Fatiman, possessed by Erzulie Dantor (a spirit or lwa in the Vodou pantheon, embodying a complex fusion of maternal strength, protective ferocity, and righteous vengeance), called upon the spirits and reportedly sacrificed a black pig, an act symbolizing a covenant of liberation, binding the revolutionaries to their cause with a force beyond the material. This was no mere performance; it was the ignition of the revolution itself, a moment where the supernatural and the political collapsed into one. In the wake of Bois Caïman, enslaved people across Saint-Domingue rose up, setting plantations ablaze, tearing apart the foundations of the colonial order, and setting into motion what would become the only successful slave revolution in history. Bois Caïman remains an origin story of Haitian sovereignty, a space where spirituality and resistance fused, and Fatiman herself endures as a spectral figure of black revolutionary motherhood, presiding over a birth that no empire could ever reclaim.

confines of the hold and the ship, as her narrative dramatically and without transition shifts to a recounting of Marie-Madeleine's, the ship captain's pregnant wife's, daily life in Nantes, France. The-one-who-flies is not a neutral spectator — she calls upon her teacher, her "father priest" of Vodun, who orders/prophesies that the unborn child of the captain and Marie-Madeleine must die. As a result, the-one-who-flies alternates between haunting Marie and returning to the ship's hold before night's end. She ultimately teaches Makandal, notorious Haitian maroon and houngan, the secrets of Vodun and identifies herself with the name Cecile.

In "the-one-who-flies," Kanor offers her own folktale of a *soukounyan* or *volant*. As Francis tells it, "[in] French Caribbean oral traditions, the *soukounyan* or *volant* designates a (usually elderly) woman who slips out of her human skin at night to transform herself into a ball of fire... [who] sucks blood from her victims" (76). This monstrous figure quite literally unsettles representations of the human as she "sheds her human skin," and while Kanor does not explicitly represent her in her wandering state as a ball of fire, she does recount her experience of changing shape, from a fish to a bird, as she travels beyond the confines the hold:

"Into the sleepy Loire I wade. Swim until the river awakens abruptly,
accelerates in its rush to join the great water. The Sea!
I am a fish. I frolic in a cool gulf before retracing my path to chase after the
sea.

I'm lifted high by the azure blue. Guided by the wind. I'm flying, leaving France. Heading south! Southwest. I am eagle." (Kanor and Palermo 146)

Despite the resonances of her name with the monstrous figure of the *soukounyan*, Kanor does not construct the-one-who-flies as a monster in the traditional sense; instead, we see these moments of human-animal transformation, of movement and flight, that are "monstrous" only insofar as they represent a hybrid being that is part-human, part-animal. This investment in the-one-who-flies as a shapeshifter troubles the assumption of animal abjection that in turn justifies the oppression of "non-human" humans, as we know from Sylvia Wynter and Zakiyyah Jackson.

In her essay "In Search of a Third Space: Fabienne Kanor's *Humus*," Dominique Aurelia reads these records of unfettered movement as an expression of Glissant's rhizomatic wanderings:

"She [Kanor] then proceeds to a dramatization of Glissant's theory of wandering. From the angle of the text of the one-who-flies, the novelist establishes a dialogical explosion, which condenses all the linguistic ferment already disseminated in the text (Vodou chants, sailors' prayers, extract from the captain's log, extracts from Isabelle de Bougainville's fictitious work, stage directions, etc.). The one-who-flies is the initiated, the priestess. The one who is named Cécile. The one who becomes invisible; who dismembers and transforms into a bird and flies all the way to France; who finds herself burning the plantations in Ayiti; who listens, as an immaterial spectator, to the masters' conversations." (88)

The-one-who-flies is the most obvious representation of insurgency and agency in Kanor's *Humus*, and she is characterized by two critical features of the re-

appropriated monstrous figure in the black Atlantic: a disturbed relationship to the human and the will to infanticide. As directed by the Vodun priest, the-one-who-flies "[draws] near the woman [Marie], [lifts] her skirt and petticoat to spoil her belly. [Her] prayer is completed" (146). The maternal anxiety experienced by Marie, who is aware of her haunting and yet possesses no tools or knowledge to combat is, is only of the "plots" to develop throughout the-one-who-flies' story— Marie begs her doctor to help her, claiming that "someone wants to eat [her] belly" (149). Again, Kanor relies on the taxonomy of consumption and digestion to represent sexual and reproductive violence, implicitly creating a comparison between the crew members who eat the mute woman's belly and the-one-who-flies, who wants to eat Marie's belly. This time, infanticide is depicted as consumption and also seems to respond to a call from the first chapter of the work, a call for revenge or justice from the mute woman to which the one-who-flies responds.

This successful haunting of Marie's womb culminates in another disturbing and unsettling birth scene, one that operates as foil for the scene of abject black maternity seen in *Le Livre d'Emma* explicitly calls upon the anxieties of racial mixing as the result and/or epitome of monstrosity:

"Push, Marie, push!"

Both hands gripping the bars on the bed, Marie, now naked, obeys.

Daylight has fled, the room lies in twilight. Damp, as before a tropical storm. In the grip of sharp contractions, her belly implodes, releases the first waters.

'There, now it's coming.' says the nurse, 'Deep breaths.' Her mouth falls agape, ventures a sound. Pants. 'Deep breaths, I said.' Marie nods, prays she'll never hear this voice again.

'One more time, you're almost there.' Marie no longer hears.

'Focus, my child!' Her belly trembles. Swells. 'Good lord!' The nurse stumbles back in horror.

From the gaping pregnant woman, water surges. A sea of blue night. Black. Full of Negroes." (154)

This scene unfolds as a moment of bodily rupture, where childbirth—already a site of vulnerability and transformation—becomes an apocalyptic unraveling of history, race, and identity. Marie, a white Frenchwoman, is in the grips of labor, her body convulsing, her breath stuttering under the nurse's clinical commands. The language is visceral, almost violent, positioning birth as an act of implosion and explosion rather than creation—her belly “implodes,” “releases,” and then “trembles,” “swells” (154). The moment of emergence, as in *Le Livre d'Emma*, is instead met with horror: the nurse recoils, the room is filled not with an infant's cry but with the impossible, the unimaginable—“a sea of blue night. Black. Full of Negroes” (154). This passage operates within a monstrous grammar of excess, where birth, water, and history all overwhelm the scene. Marie does not give birth to a child, but to a flood, an undoing of the white maternal body that gestures toward an uncontainable historical reckoning. The amniotic fluid

becomes an ocean—an unmistakable invocation of the Middle Passage, where the water is not merely liquid but a vessel of Black lives lost and displaced.

The moment inverts reproductive logics: instead of affirming racial purity, birth here acts as a haunting, a confrontation with the submerged past that white womanhood is supposed to distance itself from. Marie's haunted and abject body becomes a conduit for something beyond her control, something the nurse—a representative of institutional whiteness—cannot rationalize or contain. The shock and horror underscore how whiteness seeks to suppress the realities of racial history, but here, it literally bursts forth from within. Marie, stripped of agency, is reduced to the medium through which this history is reborn, violently disrupting her presumed autonomy. The scene refuses closure; we are left with the unsettling vision of the room being consumed by a tide of the repressed, an undoing of colonial mythologies that insist on separation, on purity, on forgetting. Instead, this birth is an unmaking of the human. As Wynter and Mignolo tells us, the womb is an origin story through which the descendants of the enslaved makes sense of their identities and their senses of being:

"...we are trapped in a knowledge system that fails to notice that the stories of what it means to be Human—specifically origin stories that explain who / what we are—are, in fact, narratively constructed... It follows that we fail to notice that evolution, dysselektion, and biocentricity are origin stories with an ontological effect." (107).

However, in part by staging these monstrous birth scenes, the women writers of the black Atlantic question and unsettle these origin stories, creating space for conceptions of identity and being that are incomprehensible to the logic of the slave episteme (that are, in fact, non-ontological).

killing kinship

"Slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship."
— Saidiya Hartman, "Is Kinship Always
Already Homosexual?"³⁵

*"You understand, that is what destruction is: when
your own flesh and blood feel obliged to reject you,
in order to feel that they exist."*
— Marie-Célie Agnant, *Le Livre d'Emma*

In Marie-Célie Agnant's *Le Livre d'Emma*, kinship is always already precluded, perilous, and perilous—haunted by the curse of *partus sequitur ventrem*, kinship is a destructive force that perpetuates the social death of enslaved and their descendants. Agnant provides a genealogy of Emma's curse that begins with Malayiki, the mother of Kilima:

"Everything started with Kilima,' Mattie then begins. With Kilima, because that is the name of our ancestor, the first of our forbears taken away by the slave traders. Kilima, in Swahili, means 'mountain.' That's the name the elders gave her the day she was born. There was only one thing she remembered from her past life: the voice of her mother, Malayika; that voice, like the bite of a beast whose violent poison had seeped into her.

³⁵ Quoted by Judith Butler in this essay.

The voice of her mother, screaming on the shore, while the slave ship cuts through the water, tearing open the limpid blue of the ocean. The ship sails away, carrying off in its flanks its cargo of ebony wood, including Kilima. The ship leaves and Malayiki screams, screams her soul out onto the beach.

'In Swahili, 'malayiki' means guardian angel.'

'Can anyone let out such a scream and stay alive, my child?'

'No, Mattie.'

'You do understand. One cannot let out such a scream and stay alive, the child Kilima told herself. For sure, her mother must have expelled her soul in that scream. She no longer had any doubt: that voice which had rooted itself in her, was the soul of her mother, which had left her body on the shore to accompany her daughter.'" (162-163)

Echoing historian and theorist Saidiya Hartman's analysis of the slave trade as the loss of the mother³⁶, Agnant offers a visceral and poignant description of this loss—the loss of the mother, which is also the loss of kinship—as a mark that burrows into the flesh and soul of the enslaved, a mark that paradoxically gets passed down matrilineally despite being the embodiment of the perversions of maternity and kinship perpetuated by slavery. *Le Livre d'Emma* traces the trajectory of this curse through generations of Emma's family: Kilima attempts to drown her unwanted child (the first Emma) before killing herself; generations of Emmas and Rosas later, despite the infanticidal actions of their ancestors, the line

³⁶ "Because of the slave trade you lose your mother, if you know your mother, if you know your history, you know where you come from.' To lose your mother was to be denied your kin, country, and identity. To lose your mother was to forget your past. The letters distilled the history of the transatlantic slave trade to this: I was an orphan." (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 85)

continues, and Rosa gives birth to offensively golden-skinned babies (Fifie and Gracie) who disavow her; Fifie gives birth to Emma and hates her; Emma gives birth to Lola, who she kills in her madness or mercy. Despite successful continuity of their family bloodlines, despite a shared biological origin, there is no sense of affiliation or attachment in this family, particularly in the doomed mother-daughter dyads are reproduced. In this schema of family, kin *only* a biological signifier, nothing more.

This state of kin-lessness is not just a characteristic of slavery but its defining quality, as we have seen in the works of French anthropologist Claude Meillassoux, Black Feminist scholar Hortense Spillers, and Saidiya Hartman. In his controversial work *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, Meillassoux studies precolonial African slavery, taking as his departure point that "the slave is above all... the alien [or anti-kin] *par excellence*" (28). Meillassoux makes a distinction between biological and social reproduction, arguing that social reproduction is key to creating and maintaining kinship, defined as "*a codified expression of the common development of men relative to each other*" (25). As a result, slavery is "the antithesis of kinship," as the slave is juridically incapable of reproducing socially (25). Put another way, using sociologist Orlando Patterson's phrasing, the slave is and reproduces social death, thus the "essence of slavery... is, the slave's inability to become 'kin'" (Meillassoux 34). The institution of slavery

reforged kinship into a blood-logic, one that only operated through consanguinity and revoked social belonging/life. This colonial conception of kinship is not the only model; Meillassoux actually begins this work by thinking about a Malinka³⁷ proverb in which kinship "[expresses] not 'consanguinity' but rather 'congeneration': the growing up of individuals together and in relation to each other" (24). Slavery, however, depended on and articulated itself through the re-wording of kinship's descriptive statement—by replacing the grammar of togetherness and relation with that of blood and profit, of kinlessness.

In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Spillers claims that "the destruction of the African name, of kin, of linguistic, and ritual connections is so obvious [in the records of the slave trade] that we tend to overlook it" (73). Citing and amending Meillassoux's propositions, Spillers also considers the destruction of kinship as a defining characteristic of slavery and its afterlives:

"Meillassoux argues that 'slavery creates an economic and social agent whose virtue lies in being outside the kinship system' ['Female Slavery,' Robertson and Klein 50]. Because the Atlantic trade involved heterogeneous social and ethnic formations in an explicit power relationship, we certainly cannot mean 'kinship system' in precisely the same way that Meillassoux observes at work within the intricate calculus of descent among West African societies. However, the idea becomes useful as a point of contemplation when we try to sharpen our own sense of the African female's reproductive uses within the diasporic enterprise

³⁷ The Malinka people refers to the Malinke, also known as Mandinka, Maninka, or Mandingo, a prominent West African ethnic group. They are part of the larger Mandé cultural group and are primarily found in the modern countries of Mali, Guinea, Senegal, The Gambia, Ivory Coast, and Guinea-Bissau.

of enslavement and the genetic reproduction of the enslaved. In effect, under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the Mother, nor is s/he 'related' to the 'owner,' though the latter 'possesses' it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, and, as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony. In the social outline that Meillassoux is pursuing, the offspring of the enslaved, 'being unrelated both to their begetters and to their owners... find themselves in the situation of being orphans' [50]." (74)

In this passage, building on her reading of Meillassoux, Spillers draws attention to the consequences of "kinlessness" for the descendants of the enslaved. In the context of the transatlantic slave trade, rather than pre-colonial West Africa, children born to enslaved women are not fully integrated into the mother's kinship network (as it does not exist, or it exists in such a state of paradox as to be inaccessible), nor are they genuinely related to the slave owner (even when the owner is the biological father). As a result, these children exist in a kind of orphaned state, detached from both their birth families and the families of their oppressors. The result, according to Spillers, is that "'family,' as we practice and understand it 'in the West' — the *vertical* transfer of power of a bloodline... — becomes the mythically revered privileged of a free and freed community" (74).

Both Spillers and Meillassoux point out that this enforced state of kinlessness is, in fact, crucial to the apparatus and profitability of slavery, as unchecked kinship rights would preclude access to the next generation of laborers and labor-producers:

"Certainly if 'kinship' were possible, the property relations would be undermined, since the offspring would then 'belong' to a mother and a father. In the system that Douglass articulates, genetic reproduction becomes, then, not an elaboration of the life-principle in its cultural overlap, but an extension of the boundaries of proliferating properties." (75)

Spillers' formulation here reveals the stakes and consequences of kinship-as-consanguinity: that in America kinship has assumed the logics of property and belonging and reinforces "vertical transfer of power of a bloodline," which is antithetical to organization of the enslaved population (74). This argument, which is essentially a critique of consanguinity as a model for relation, opens space for horizontal, rhizomatic imaginings of relation that are unintelligible to the institution of slavery—an argument that I intend to return to later in this chapter. Returning to Spillers, she outlines this state of kinlessness and its consequences in order to make clear that "[under] these arrangements... 'reproduction,' 'motherhood,' 'pleasure,' and 'desire' are thrown into unrelieved crisis" (76). Meillassoux makes this claim with a different grammar:

"Caught between women slaves stripped of their sex and distant mothers stripped of their children, the slave class was born only of a womb of iron and gold. Being thus born of matter, the slave could not be born into life: the slave was used up like 'black ore'." (313)

The womb is thus a black Atlantic grammar that is produced by and reproduces this enforced state of kinlessness; it is both a metaphoric symbol and a material geography that is essential to the institution of slavery, to the production of a

self-reproducing labor force. This unrelieved crisis is the point of departure for black Atlantic writers like Marie-Célie Agnant, whose writing elucidates that these "lexis" are not only thrown individually into crisis but also entangled together in mutually compromising and reinforcing ways (Spillers 76).

In his essay "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," Nathaniel Mackey further explores the relationship between (wounded) kinship and language. Mackey begins by reading the Kaluli creation myth of music³⁸, in which the violation of kinship is the condition of possibility for the birth of music:

"For the Kaluli, then, the quintessential source of music is the orphan's ordeal—an orphan being anyone denied kinship, social sustenance, anyone who suffers, to use Orlando Patterson's phrase, 'social death,' the prototype for which is the boy who becomes a muni bird. Song is both a complaint and a consolation dialectically tied to that ordeal, where in back of 'orphan' one hears echoes of 'orphanic,' a music which turns on abandonment, absence, loss. Think of the black spiritual 'Motherless Child.' Music is wounded kin-ship's last resort."³⁹ (29)

³⁸ "This reflects and is founded on the myth regarding the origin of music, the myth of the boy who became a muni bird. The myth tells of a boy who goes to catch crayfish with his older sister. He catches none and repeatedly begs for those caught by his sister, who again and again refuses his request. Finally he catches a shrimp and puts it over his nose, causing it to turn a bright purple red, the color of a muni bird's beak. His hands turn into wings and when he opens his mouth to speak the falsetto cry of a muni bird comes out. As he flies away his sister begs him to come back and have some of the crayfish but his cries continue and become a song, semiwept, semisung: 'Your crayfish you didn't give me. I have no sister. I'm hungry...'" (Mackey 29)

³⁹ "Motherless Child" is a traditional black spiritual that dates to plantation era in the United States and became part of the soundtrack of the Civil Rights Movement. The song repeats the same six lines many times each: "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child/ A long way from home, a long way from home/ Sometimes I feel like I'm almost done/ And a long, long way from home, a long way from home/ True believer/ A long, long way from home."

While this myth focuses on the purposeful denial of kinship by the sister as the origin of music, Mackey puts this myth more explicitly in conversation with the experience of wounded kinship in the afterlives of slavery, echoing Meillassoux and Hartman who equate denied kinship with social death. Mackey's explanation of wounded kinship enables an extended meditation on the relationship between wounded kinship and language more generally:

"Music is prod and precedent for a recognition that the linguistic realm is also the realm of the orphan, as in Octavio Paz's characterization of language as an orphan severed from the presence to which it refers and which presumably gave it birth. This recognition troubles, complicates and contends with the unequivocal referentiality taken for granted in ordinary language..." (31)

I understand this argument as the recognition of poetic language, wielded to reveal and complicate the legacy of wounded kinship, as an intervention in and unsettling of the colonial relationship to language. Mackey relies on poet Octavio Paz to elaborate on the power of poetic language as a disruptive force, an elaboration that is haunted by the work of Aimé Césaire on the poet and knowledge (31).

In "Poetry and Knowledge," Césaire critiques scientific knowledge as an essentially colonial expression of language that "enumerates, measures, classifies and kills," corresponding to the overrepresentation of the human as theorized by Wynter (17). As Césaire argues, scientific knowledge is "an impoverished

knowledge... for at its inception... there stands an impoverished humanity" (18) read this impoverished humanity as the degrees of humanity determined by the "variable of *race/racial* difference," recalling Wynter's famous articulation of the archipelagos of poverty constructed by the slave episteme (Wynter, "Before Miranda's Meanings" 357). In this essay, which was originally an address at a conference titled "International Conference of Philosophy consecrated to problems of knowledge"⁴⁰ in 1944 in Haiti, several decades before Octavio Paz's work on poetic language, Césaire pronounces that, through its connection to language, poetic language unsettles the overrepresentations stemming both Greco-Roman and Enlightenment epistemic knowledge productions:

"This is the right occasion to recall that the unconscious that all true poetry calls upon is the receptacle of original relationships that bind us to nature. Within us, all the ages of the mankind. Within us, all humankind. Within us, animal, vegetable, mineral. Mankind is not only mankind. It is *universe...*" (23)

I read Césaire's assertion that "mankind is not only mankind" as the acknowledgement, taken up by Sylvia Wynter, that representations of the Man are formed by these scientific epistemologies that hierarchize being, creating artificial categories of being as distinct from each other (us, animal, vegetable, mankind) (23).

⁴⁰ Congrès international de philosophie consacré aux problèmes de la connaissance

For Césaire, the poet is attuned this primal, non-ontological connection to nature and universe, and to mime Mignolo, poetry is a form of epistemic disobedience that disturbs the colonial matrix of power:

"There we see resolved, and by the poetic state, two of the most anguishing antinomies that exist: the antinomy of one and other, the antinomy of Self and World...
Pregnant with the world, the poet speaks.
He speaks and his speech returns language to its [pure state]⁴¹.
By [pure state] I mean not subject to habit or thought but only to the cosmic thrust. The poet's word, the primal word: rupestral design in the stuff of sound.
The poet's utterance: primal utterance, the universe played with and copied." (24-25)

This ability to restore language to its "pure state" can be read as an alternative to the self-fulfilling prophecy of the dialectic relationship between colonizer and colonized and, ultimately, a praxis of decolonization that unsettles Enlightenment epistemology rather than replicating it. Bringing us back full circle, this description of poetic language mirrors the framework offered by Mackey and Paz:

"Each time we are served by words, we mutilate them. But the poet is not served by words. He is their servant. In serving them, he returns them to the plenitude of their nature, makes them recover their being. Thanks to poetry, language reconquers its original state. First, its plastic and sonorous values, generally disdained by thought; next, the affective values; and, finally, the expressive ones. To purify language, the poet's task, means to give it back its original nature." (Paz 37)

⁴¹ "L'etat pur" here has been translated as "purity"—I adapted the translation to the more literal "pure state."

Mackey concerns himself more with *how* this purification of language occurs, offering the reminder that music is extra-sensorial and "rises above what's apprehensible to the senses" (30). Music is thus a particular expression of poetic language, one that draws attention to the "coinherence of immanence and transcendence" of language, which is also an anagram of incoherence—music, and poetic language, sets the stage for the meeting and unification of the metaphysical and the social, without opening itself up for the probing inquiries of scientific knowledge. If wounded kinship, as theorized by Mackey and Meillassoux, is that dissection of the social and the biological, then poetic language is a balm or salve that imagines other ways of being-with-each-other and being-in-the-world.

The incarnation *par excellence* of Césaire's figure of the poet is none other than the re-appropriated character of Ariel in his iconic work of decolonial rewriting, *A Tempest*. In Césaire's work, the basic plot of the play is based on the Shakespearian version⁴², but with significant differences. Césaire retains

⁴² In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the magician Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan, and his daughter Miranda live on a deserted island due to the actions of Prospero's jealous brother, Antonio (who was helped by the King of Naples, Alonso). Having gained magical powers from his vast education, Prospero masters the natural elements and indigenous spirits that inhabit the island: notably, the spirit of air and wind Ariel, as well as Caliban, an island native and the son of the former ruler of the island, Sycorax. At the end of the play, Prospero reconciles with his brother and the King, marries his daughter to the Prince Ferdinand, frees Ariel and Caliban, and finally renounces his magic in favor of ruling his duchy.

Shakespeare's original characters, but specifies that Prospero is the white master, Ariel is "a mulatto slave," and Caliban is "a black slave" (3). Césaire underlines the importance of those who inhabited the island before the arrival of Prospero and his daughter Miranda; the characters Caliban and Ariel are forced into slavery by Prospero and are constructed by Césaire as allegoric characters. Accordingly, Caliban and Ariel react differently to their situation of slavery. On one hand, Caliban prefers violent revolution and rejects his given name—"Caliban"—as produced by the language of his colonizer, Prospero. He instead demands to be called "X" and revolts against his enslavement, while on the other hand Ariel prefers a strategy of non-violence and contents himself to ask for his freedom from Prospero. At the end of the play, Prospero grants Ariel his freedom, but retains control of the island and Caliban—which marks an important departure from Shakespeare's original story, in which Prospero frees both natives and leaves the island with the others. The play, centered around these three allegoric characters, serves as a reflection on the concepts of race, power, and decolonization.

Ariel personifies the stereotypes of the mulatto (and *métissage*⁴³ in Glissantian terms): a relatively obedient slave who registers his resistance calmly and asks for his freedom from the master. To Caliban, Ariel is essentially a coward who benefits from favored treatment due to his status as a mulatto. However, both Caliban and Ariel embody the enforced state of kinlessness that defines slavery; Caliban typically has been severed from his mother, while Ariel's origins are less clear. These two mirrored characters also offer two distinct linguistic responses to this wounded kinship — Caliban shouts, Ariel sings. Ariel's poetic language as strategy of resistance that mirrors Césaire's theory of poetic language, suggesting that the language of the colonizer can, in fact, be mobilized against the master, not through a reversal of its symbolic system but through a poeticization. Leaning on Césaire's work in "Poetry and Knowledge," the figure of the poet is likened to and imagined as a tree, whose sense of being-in-the-world is non-ontological:

"Mankind, distracted by its activities, delighted by what is useful, has lost that sense of the tree. Here is the superiority of the animal. And of the tree still more than the animal... because the tree is stability, it is also surrender.

Surrender to the vital movement, to the creative *élan*. Joyous surrender...

⁴³ Literally an ethnic mix or interbreeding, but in Glissant's hands, *métissage* signals a critical hybridization that deconstructs binary formulations and motivates creative expression. He often uses this term to describe the evolution of art in the Caribbean in the aftermath of colonialism.

The superiority of the tree over mankind, of the tree that says yes over mankind who says no. Superiority of the tree that is consent over mankind who is evasiveness; superiority of the tree, which is rootedness and deepening, over mankind who is agitation and malfeasance." (23)

Thus, Ariel is the poet, who is connected to nature and can therefore reimagine the world: he expresses, he romanticizes, he sings, he queries, he imagines himself as tree:

"After all, I might have turned into a real tree in the end. Tree: that's a word that really gives me a thrill! It often springs to mind: palm tree-springing into the sky like a fountain ending a nonchalant, squid-like elegance. The baobab-twisted like the soft entrails of some monster. Ask the calao bird that lives a cloistered season in its branches. Or the ceiba tree-spread out beneath the proud sun. O bird, O green mansions set in the living earth!" (*A Tempest* 16)

Ariel's last lines in *A Tempest* are a song, a poetic meditation on ferns, berries, and a bird-musician, that lifts him from sobriety to a state of almost drunken consciousness. Notably, the play ends with the voices of Prospero and Caliban, still yelling at each other, being overpowered by "the sound of the surf and the chirping of birds" (66).

Maryse Condé also expresses the ascendance of music as the last resort of broken or wounded kinship in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière Noire de Salem*. This "historical novel about the black witch of Salem," finds inspiration in the historical trace-absence of Tituba Indian, the *métisse* daughter of Middle Passage survivor Abena (xi). In this fictional work inspired by an archival lack, Tituba's story begins with

the untimely death of her mother, who was hanged for defending herself against a white rapist. After this loss, Tituba is raised by the community “witch,” a recluse called Man Yaya who conversed with the spirits and healed those who came for help. In the absence of her mother, Man Yaya teaches Tituba herbal remedies to heal the living, spiritual powers to see the spirits, and the knowledge that “everything lives, has a soul, and breathes” (9). Tituba’s spirit-guides, her mother and later Man Yaya, accompany her on her life of sufferance and survival: her abdication of freedom, her marriage to John Indian, her eventual sale and export to the British colonies, her persecution as a “witch” by the children of Salem, and her bittersweet return to Barbados, where — as her mother before her — Tituba is hanged, in her case for planning a revolt against the slaveowners on her island.

After having arrived in Boston enslaved, Tituba witnesses the hanging of Goody Glover, an accused witch. After this experience, Tituba declares that she realized she was pregnant and intended to kill her unborn child. Tituba's murder of her unborn child through abortion is immediately followed by her lament, a song that repeats throughout the rest of her tale:

"The moonstone dropped into the water,
Into the waters of the river,

And my fingers couldn't reach it,
Woe is me!

The moonstone has fallen.
Sitting on a rock on the riverbank

I wept and I lamented.
Oh, softly shining stone,
Glimmering at the bottom of the water.
The hunter passed that way

With his bow and arrows.
'Why are you crying, my lovely one?'
'I'm crying because my moonstone
Lies at the bottom of the water.'
'If it is but that, my lovely, I will help you.'
But the hunter dived and was drowned." (55)

This lament, which as I have said is both song and poem, is the result of denied kinship and reveals Tituba's latent maternal desire. Like Ariel, Tituba turns to poetic language to unveil and restore her relationship with nature. The lyrics of her lament, while full of haunting and mourning, mark her as a descendent of Césaire/Ariel, as she expresses her unconscious desires and acknowledgement that "within us, animal, vegetable, mineral... *universe*" (Césaire 23). The rebirth or re-symbolizing of her unborn child as moonstone affirms this non-ontological sense of being at one with the universe, in unity with all the material (and immaterial) forms in the cosmos, regardless of their proximity to so-called life. This sense of being becomes even clearer at the end of her story, as the story concludes with the Tituba's chosen daughter learning the unity of the cosmos, as Tituba had learned from Man Yaya:

"For this child of mine has learned to recognize my presence in the twitching of an animal's coat, the crackling of a fire between four stones, the rainbow-hued babbling of the river, and the sound of the wind as it whistles through the great trees on the hills." (Condé 179)

A Tempest is characterized as a psychodrama by Césaire, a form that allows Césaire to stage the performance of multiplicity: the repeated and varied costuming of different racial identities, the fluid and interchangeable imitations and maskings, that permit the construction (lyrically and poetically) of the self. These overlapping identities imply that the colonizer is always in conflict with themselves, and that the colonized carries the desire to revolt and, in the end, dominate—both identities are contaminated by Enlightenment rationality, through a process of dialectics, and thus by the same colonial ideologies of dominance. In *Poetics of Relation*, poet-philosopher Édouard Glissant also analyzes Shakespeare's legacy, this time through the lens of filiation and legitimacy:

"In the Western world the hidden cause (the consequence) of both Myth and Epic is filiation, its work setting out upon the fixed linearity, always toward a projection, a project. If legitimacy is ruptured, the chain of filiation is no longer meaningful, and the community wanders the world, no longer able to lay claim to the any primordial necessity. Shakespeare is considered to have confirmed this work of legitimacy in his theater. If there is something rotten in Denmark, it is because the 'line' of succession to the throne has been broken, demanding catharsis with Hamlet as victim. In *The Tempest*, however, Shakespeare conceived of these two dimensions, both founding legitimacy and power of conquest as ultimately working together." (47-53)

Here, Glissant articulates how the plot and drama of *The Tempest* are in fact motivated by threats to legitimacy and filiation—Prospero and Miranda are stranded on this island due to his rightful place as the Duke of Milan having been wrongfully seized, and this rightful place in turns justifies his conquest and colonization of the island and its inhabitants. The intrigue is ultimately resolved through the "reestablishment of his power, formerly usurped;" the stake of this work is always restoring the legitimate line of succession in Milan (and on the island, although I will return to this idea later) (54). Therefore, according to Glissant, the logic of colonialism itself depends on discourses of filiation and legitimacy (extensions of a colonial conception of kinship), and that logic can be seen clearly in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—"It is solely from the point of view of the hero, the bearer of Westernness, in order to assert the legitimacy of his power over the world" (54).

Glissant further argues that "a decolonized Caliban... challenges Prospero's projective legitimacy. through the individual ardor of lyricism and the collective practice of politics" (54). However, in comparison with the character of Ariel, Caliban's obsession with his right to rule the island as "king"—what J. Michael Dash calls his "monomania"—expressed through his "militant idiom" signals a re-investment in colonial kinship practices of filiation and legitimacy,

what Spillers characterized as the "vertical transfer of power of a bloodline" (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* xx; Spillers 74). Beneath his rebellious attitude, Caliban possesses the same desires to dominate and subjugate the other—in this case, Prospero. Furthermore, Caliban's "monomania" arises from his single-minded obsession with regaining control of the island, with restoring the legitimate line of succession from Sycorax to himself: "Without you? I'd be the king, that's what I'd be, the King of the island. The King of the island given to me by my mother, Sycorax" (Césaire, *A Tempest* 17). Caliban does not envision a world without hierarchy, slavery, or violence; he envisions a world in reverse, in which he is the conqueror and Prospero (crucially, also Ariel, who had been the captive of his mother) the conquered. His connection to the island, and nature at large, is one of knowledge extraction and power—he willingly surrenders this knowledge to Prospero and, in doing so, facilitates Prospero's dominion over the island (18-19).

If Shakespeare's version sets the stakes as the continued legitimacy of the Milan throne—and by extension the legitimacy of the West's imperialism—Césaire's version reveals Caliban's own struggle is informed by the very same stakes of filiation and legitimacy, instead of the expanse and opacity of Ariel. According to Dash, "Glissant's work treats the subversion of the ordering ego and attempts to transcend the monomania of Caliban. What Glissant emphasizes

is the structuring force of landscape, community, and collective unconscious," which I argue Césaire also emphasizes through the character of Ariel (xiii). Trapped in his nostalgia for his 'mother tongue' or 'native language,' what I am now reading as his attachment to kinship, Caliban attempts to revolt by mobilizing the language imposed by Prospero against him, deforming Prospero's French into curses and idioms, but his approach is always structured by his opposition to Prospero; in doing so, however, Caliban misses the opportunity to manipulate and subvert that very language through creative expression, which is to say poetry. According to Glissant, "errantry [poetic thought] does not proceed from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (de-territorialized) situation of origin; it is not a resolute act of rejection or an uncontrolled impulse of abandonment," as performed by Caliban (18). In the end, Caliban and Prospero's motivations, attitudes, and relations to language function as two sides of one coin—they remain essentially blocked from a primal relationship to nature, to the universe, and therefore from poetics.

Free from a mythic nostalgia for the past, for a mother tongue, or the legitimacy of his mother, Ariel's language manifests as a magical connection to the environment and landscape of the island, and his self-expression is poetic in nature, transcending the vitriolic, binary opposition between Caliban and Prospero. Ariel, who had been marginalized and oppressed under both power

systems (Sycorax's rule *and* Prospero's) on the island, embodies a counter-poetics of Relation "that is latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible" (32). The fact that the play ends with Prospero and Caliban locked in their twisted kinship and shouting (scientific knowledge and language), only to be drowned up by the sounds of nature (poetic knowledge), reveals the stakes of a poetic investment in language as the willful surrender of kinship as an organizing principle of thought.

"Music is wounded kinship's last resort," Mackey claims (29). This investment in and affirmation of poetic language and/as music is found through black Atlantic imaginings, as seen in Césaire's *A Tempest* and Condé's *Moi, Tituba*. Tituba, who is obsessed with how she will be remembered after her death, agonizes that she won't be included in the history books with the other survivors (and victims) of the Salem Witch Trials and argues with Christophe, her Maroon lover, about the possibility of a song in her honor. However, the epilogue resolves this tension and affirms the power of poetic language in the aftermath of kinship. The epilogue begins with Tituba exclaiming that there is a song in her memory:

"There is a song about Tituba! I hear it from one end of the island to the other, from North Point to Silver Sands, from Bridgetown to Bottom Bay. It runs along the ridge of the hills. It is poised on the tip of the heliconia. The other day I heard a boy four or five years old humming it. In delight, I dropped three ripe mangoes at his feet and he remained rooted to the

spot, staring up at the tree that had given him such a present out of season. Yesterday it was a woman beating her wash on the rocks of the river who was humming it. Out of gratitude I wrapped myself around her neck and there she was young and beautiful again, admiring her reflection in the water.

I hear it wherever I go." (175)

Despite having committed infanticide and dying during her second, desired pregnancy (read: despite the wounded kinship that made Tituba's life "such a bitter, bitter story"), Tituba find solace and salvation in her song, a poetic form of language that allows her memory to live on even in the absence of biological reproduction—perhaps even because of the absence of biological reproduction/colonial kinship (175). Tituba's "real story" begins with this song and her second life as a spirit on her beloved island, and the book ends with the collocation of two realities that are actually one—chosen family and poetic language.

In the epilogue, Tituba shares that she is able to choose her descendent and so re-forge a relationship to motherhood and kinship that is "nobler" than biological, colonial kinship:

"I do not belong to the civilization of the Bible and Bigotry. My people will keep my memory in their hearts and have no need for the written word. It's in their heads. In their hearts and in their heads. Since I died without giving birth to a child, the spirits have allowed me to choose a descendant...

I think I chose her because I watched her come into this world.

I was used to looking after Délices, her mother, a black Creole living in Bottom Bay on the Willoughby plantation. As she had already lost two or

three children at birth, this time she had me come as quickly as possible. To stave off his anxiety, her man was downing glass after glass of rum on the veranda.

The birth took hours and the baby presented herself in the breech position. The mother was losing both her blood and her strength and her poor exhausted soul had but one wish and that was to slip into the other world. The fetus refused to accompany her and fought furiously to enter the universe from which she was separated by only a fragile valve of flesh... A child I didn't give birth to but whom I chose! What motherhood could be nobler!" (176-177)

This epilogue establishes a practice of kinship that does not assume consanguinity and is thus free of the curse of *partus sequitur ventrem*; the mise-en-scène of this practice begins, as well, with wounded kinship and a painful scene of birth, further cementing the necessary unsettling of the womb and birth scenes to elaborate new representations of kinship, and thus the human. This affirmation of motherhood and kinship is actually depicted as "nobler" than biological reproduction, implying that perhaps that the unsettled womb, the de-biologized womb, restores kinship to its pure state, free of blood logics and blood mothers, as Césaire argued poetic speech restores language to its pure state (177). To restore kinship to its pure state is to purify its definition as consanguinity and recall the Manika saying "'*ka wolo nyoronka, ka mo nyoranka*': to be born together, to mature together... [which expresses] congeneration" rather than consanguinity (Meillassoux 23-24).

Tituba's insistence on choice is also a queering of kinship, as it borrows its grammar from queer taxonomies of chosen families and other mothers. This queering of kinship is further witnessed by the assemblages of chosen family and other mothers throughout the corpus chosen here: while Emma's maternal bloodline is cursed, she herself finds solace and sanctuary with Mattie, a cousin-cum-mother who takes her in and teaches her what she needs to know. Kilima, the first of Emma's enslaved ancestors, was taken in by Cecile, a mother who had lost her own daughter and yet protected Kilima with her life. Man Yaya adopts in Tituba, and Tituba chooses Samantha. Tante Atie raises Sophie. Grandma Charlotte and Man Augustine love Lisette. The other mothers, as they say, are everywhere.

This queering of kinship is a radical unsettling of the overrepresentation of man as an enunciation of power. In her polemic essay "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?", gender studies celebrity Judith Butler echoes critical works of black kinship and emphasizes that it is "not possible to separate questions of kinship from property relations... and from the fictions of 'bloodline'" (15). She instead redefines "kinship as a practice of doing" and argues that "the task at hand is to rework and revise the social organization... to produce non-state-centered forms of support and alliance... [and to affirm] kinship as a practice of *doing*" (34, 21). While Butler here is concerned with the double-bind of

gay marriage, her consideration of kinship mirrors the reading I built above, in which kinship defined by the institutions of the slave episteme (including but not limited to the state) as consanguinity impedes horizontal, rhizomatic, and queer practices of kinship. Butler's precise wording about the "fiction of 'bloodline'" calls out to Sylvia Wynter and deepens any consideration of wounded kinship in literature. It reminds me that the mobilization of poetic language to address the blood-logic of wounded kinship (as we've most recently seen in *Le Livre d'Emma*, *Une Tempête*, and *Moi, Tituba* but is actually the point of departure for this dissertation) unsettles the bio-logics of the slave episteme by revealing them as narratives, as fiction themselves, that have been mobilized for the purpose of assuring the reproduction of Greco-Roman-cum-Enlightenment knowledge production. These works de-biologize the womb, which is the organizing thought principle of the colonial matrix of power, and in doing so, decolonize the episteme.

5. conclusion

This dissertation has traced the figure of the womb in black Atlantic literature and theory, revealing its central role as both a site of racial inscription and a space of radical resistance. Across these texts, the womb does not simply function as a biological organ or a passive metaphor but as a structuring grammar—one that dictates how blackness is imagined, how kinship is regulated, and how reproduction is conscripted into the logics of racial capitalism. In situating the womb at the intersection of the historical, the ontological, and the epistemological, this project underscores how the enslaved and colonized maternal body has been continuously positioned as both a site of social death and a locus of insurgency. By examining how black women writers engage with and challenge the imposed grammar of the womb, this study has illuminated the ways in which reproductive agency has been simultaneously foreclosed and reclaimed. The narratives analyzed here refuse the easy categorization of motherhood as either a purely biological or purely metaphorical condition. Instead, they insist on the material realities of childbirth, abortion, and reproductive refusal while also exposing the ideological violence that seeks to fix the womb within the colonial matrix of power. Through strategies of narrative disruption, counter-taxonomies, and spectral hauntings,

these texts reveal the womb as a contested space—a space where the logics of the hold, the plantation, and the prison are both inscribed and unsettled.

Central to this work has been an interrogation of how the womb operates within black Atlantic thought, not merely as a site of life-making but as a terrain of struggle. From the womb-as-hold to the womb-as-prison cell, these texts expose the ways in which black maternal bodies have been bound to systems of accumulation and extraction, reduced to sites of forced reproduction under the logics of *partus sequitur ventrem* and racial capitalism. Yet, as we have seen, these same texts refuse to allow the womb to remain solely a space of negation. Instead, they mobilize alternative grammars—of fugitivity, of refusal, of care—that disrupt the dominant epistemologies that have sought to discipline and define black maternity. This dissertation has also drawn on the insights of Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers, Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe, among others, to consider how the womb functions as a conceptual tool within black studies. In tracing the tensions between metaphor and materiality, between imposed meaning and insurgent possibility, this work has sought to illuminate the complex ways in which black maternal figures navigate the afterlives of slavery. Rather than resigning the womb to a predetermined fate, these texts demand that we recognize its multiplicity—as a site of violence and refusal, as an inheritance and a burden, as a grammar of both constraint and liberation.

The critical interventions of these black women writers refuse the idea that kinship must be defined through blood or that reproduction must serve the imperatives of the state. Instead, they reimagine kinship as a practice, one that extends beyond biological ties and embraces forms of chosen family, queer affiliations, and mothering that transcend normative frameworks. This queering of kinship, as explored throughout this dissertation, offers a radical reconfiguration of relationality — one that challenges the very foundations of Western epistemology. At the heart of this project is the understanding that the black maternal body has never been allowed full autonomy under the logics of racial capitalism. Whether through the reproductive control imposed under slavery, the medical experimentation on black women's bodies, or the contemporary policing of black motherhood, the womb has been a battleground — a space where the limits of freedom and personhood are continuously negotiated. The works examined here refuse to allow that battleground to remain solely one of subjugation; instead, they carve out spaces of resistance, of agency, of refusal.

In the texts of this corpus, we see how black women refuse to accept the conditions imposed upon them, even when those refusals take the form of acts deemed monstrous. Whether through infanticide, abortion, or self-annihilation,

these characters assert a form of agency that refuses the state's claims over their bodies. Such acts, while unsettling, force us to confront the ways in which black maternity has been shaped by the violence of the colonial order. They demand that we acknowledge the impossibility of "pure" mothering within structures designed to extract and exploit black life. By unsettling the dominant narratives of motherhood, these texts push us to reconsider how we engage with black maternal figures in both literary and historical contexts. They remind us that the womb, as a site of struggle, cannot be understood in isolation from the broader systems of power that seek to control it. They challenge us to think beyond the binaries of victimhood and resistance, complicity and defiance, biology and metaphor, and instead to recognize the tangled, contradictory, and deeply political nature of black reproduction.

Ultimately, this dissertation calls for a rethinking of how we approach the black maternal within both literary studies and black studies more broadly. It demands that we move beyond static categories and instead embrace the radical, insurgent possibilities that black maternal figures offer. By reading the womb as grammar, we uncover new ways of understanding how blackness is produced, how kinship is imagined, and how resistance is enacted. In doing so, we affirm that black maternal figures are not simply vessels of history but architects of new

futures, ones that refuse the terms of the past and insist on the possibility of something else—something more.

References

- Abenon, Lucien, and Jacques Cauna. *Antilles 1789 : La Révolution aux Caraïbes*. Nathan, 1989.
- Agnant, Marie-Célie. *The Book of Emma*. Translated by Zilpha Ellis, Insomniac Press, 2006.
- “-ation, Suffix.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1602634437>. Accessed 20 Jan 2025.
- Aurélia, Dominique. "Fabienne Kanor, écrivaine des passages." *Amour, sexe, genre et trauma dans la Caraïbe francophone*, edited by Gladys M. Francis, L'Harmattan, 2016, pp. 73-85.
- . "In Search of a Third Space: Fabienne Kanor's *Humus*." *small axe* 36, Nov 2011, DOI 10.1215/07990537-1443295, pp 80-88.
- Bargu, Banu. *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*. Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Bonilla, Yarimar. "Unsettling Sovereignty." *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 32, Issue 3, 2017, American Anthropological Association, pp. 330–339.
- Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. 2001. E-book ed., Picador, 2024.
- Brooks, Kinitra Dechaun. *The Black Maternal: Heterogeneity and Resistance in Literary Representations of black Mothers in 20th Century African American and Afro-Caribbean Women 's Fiction*. Diss. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 2008.
- Butler, Judith. "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13:1 (2002), pp. 14-44.
- Césaire, Aimé. *A Tempest: Based on Shakespeare's "The Tempest": Adaptation for a black Theatre*. Translated by Richard Miller, TCG Translations, 2002.

- Césaire, Aimé. *The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire: Bilingual Edition*. Translated by A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman, Wesleyan University Press, 2017.
- . *Discours sur le colonialisme ; suivi de Discours sur la négritude*. Présence Africaine, 2015.
- . *Discourse on Colonialism*. Monthly Review Press, 2001.
- . *Journal of a Homecoming = Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Translated by N. Gregson Davis, bilingual edition, Duke University Press, 2017.
- . "Poetry and Knowledge." *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry: 1946-82*. Translated by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, University Press of Virginia, 1990, pp. xlii-lvi.
- . *Une Tempête; D'après "La Tempête" De Shakespeare. Adaptation Pour Un Théâtre Nègre*. Éditions Du Seuil, 1969.
- Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Césaire, Perse, Glissant, les liaisons magnétiques*. Éditions Philippe Rey, 2013.
- Charania, Moon. *Archive of tongues: an intimate history of brownness*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Condé, Maryse. *I, Tituba, black Witch of Salem*. Translated by Richard Philcox, University Of Virginia Press, 2009.
- . *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*. 2014. Translated by Richard Philcox, Seagull Books, 2020.
- . *Moi, Tituba, sorcière Noire de Salem*. Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille, 1988.
- Danticat, Edwidge. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1994.
- Dash, J. Michael. "Roundtable: Writing, History, and Revolution. Dany Laferrière, Louis-Philippe Dalembert, Edwidge Danticat, Évelyne Trouillot." *Small Axe* Vol 9:2, Sep 2005, pp. 189-201. Accessed 18 Dec 2024.

- De Ferrari, Guillermina. "A Caribbean Hauntology: The Sensorial Art of Joscelyn Gardner and M. Nourbese Philip." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 27:3, pp. 271-293. *Tandf Online*. Accessed 2 Dec 2024.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres de Marx: L'État de la dette, le travail de deuil, et la nouvelle Internationale*. 1993. E-book ed., Éditions du Seuil, 2024.
- . *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. 1994. Translated by Peggy Camuf, e-book ed., Routledge, 1994.
- Dukats, Mara L. "A Narrative of Violated Maternity: *Moi, Tituba, sorcière... Noire de Salem*." *World Literature Today* 67:4. 745. *Proquest*.
- "Enlever." *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, <https://www.dictionnaireacademie.fr/article/A9E1691>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2024.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox, revised edition, Grove Press, 2008.
- Francis, Gladys M. "afterword." *Humus*, Fabienne Kanor, translated by Lynn E. Palermo, University of Virginia Press, 2020.
- . "Entretien avec Fabienne Kanor, 'l'Ante-llaise par excellence.'" *French Forum* 41:3, Winter 2016, pp. 273-288. *JSTOR*. Accessed 1 Dec 2024.
- . *Odious Caribbean Women and the Palpable Aesthetics of Transgression*. Lexington Books, 2017.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom." *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley and others, vol 1, The New Press, 1997, pp. 281-301.
- . "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity." Interview by Bob Gallagher and Andrew Wilson. *The Advocate* (7 Aug 1982). 26-30, 58.
- . "The Subject and Power." *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. Taylor & Francis, 2016. 208–224.

- Foucault, Michel, and Graham Burchell. *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the College De France, 1972-1973*. Edited by Bernard E. Harcourt. Picador, 2018.
- Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. 1997. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. University of Michigan Press, 2009.
- . *Poétique de la Relation*. Gallimard, 1990.
- Glover, Kaiama. *A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being*. Duke University Press, 2021.
- . *Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon*. Liverpool University Press, 2010.
- "Gouffre." *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9G1059>, Accessed 10 Nov. 2024.
- "Gulf (n.)." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, Douglas Harper, www.etymonline.com/search?q=gulf. Accessed 10 Nov. 2024.
- Hantel, Max. "Errant Notes on a Caribbean Rhizome." *rhizomes: cultural studies in emerging knowledge* 12 (2012). Accessed 17 Dec 2024.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 18:1, 1 Jun 2016, pp. 166-173. *Tandf Online*. Accessed 16 Mar 2021.
- . *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008.
- . *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. W. W. Norton & Co, 2022.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. 1850. Norton, 1978.

- Herbeck, Jason and Évelyne Trouillot. "Entretien avec Évelyne Trouillot." *The French Review*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (Mar 2009), pp. 822-829. JSTOR. Accessed 13 Dec 2024.
- Heuving, Jeanne. "An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey." *Contemporary Literature*, University of Wisconsin Press, volume 53, number 2, Summer 2012, pp. 207-236. JSTOR. Accessed 1 Dec 2024.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 1988.
- Joseph-Gabriel, Annette. "'Tant de silence à briser': Entretien avec Évelyne Trouillot." *Nouvelles Études Francophones*, Volume 32, Numéro 1, 2017, pp. 82-94. Project Muse. Accessed 18 Dec 2024.
- Judy, R.A. *Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poïesis in Black*. Duke University Press, 2020.
- Kanor, Fabienne. *Humus*. Éditions Gallimard, 2006.
- . *Humus*. Translated by Lynn E. Palermo, University of Virginia Press, 2020.
- . *La poétique de la cale: Variations sur le bateau négrier*. Éditions Payot & Rivages, 2022.
- . "Sillonner les ventres et les chambres." *Amour, sexe, genre et trauma dans la Caraïbe francophone*, edited by Gladys M. Francis, L'Harmattan, 2016, pp. 57-69.
- Kaplan, Sara Clarke. *The Black Reproductive: Unfree Labor and Insurgent Motherhood*. University of Minnesota Press, 2021.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

- "Labour | Labor, N." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1914709498>.
- Lara, Ana-Maurine. *Queer Freedom : Black Sovereignty*. State University of New York Press, 2020.
- Larrier, Renée. "'Crier/Écrire/Cahier' : Anagrammatic Configurations of Voice in Francophone Caribbean Narratives." *The French Review* 69:2 (Dec 1995). 275-283. *JSTOR*.
- Lorenzini, Daniele and Martina Tazzioli. "Confessional Subjects and Conducts of Non-Truth: Foucault, Fanon, and the Making of the Subject." *Theory, Culture & Society* 35:1 (2018). 71-90. *Sage*.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol." *Callaloo*, 30, Winter 1987, pp. 29-54. *JSTOR*. Accessed 1 Dec 2024.
- Maríñez, Sophie. *Spirals in the Caribbean: Representing Violence and Connection in Haiti and the Dominican Republic*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024.
- "Matrice." *Le Robert Maxi Plus*. Dictionnaires Le Robert-Sejer, 2018. 651. Accessed 11 Nov. 2024.
- "Matrix (n.)." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, Douglas Harper, www.etymonline.com/word/matrix#etymonline_v_9720. Accessed 10 Nov. 2024.
- Meillassoux, Claude. *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*. Translated by Alide Dasnois, The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- . "Female Slavery." *Women and Slavery in Africa*. Edited by Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein. University of Wisconsin Press, 1983. 49-67.
- Mignolo, Walter D. "Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: on (de)coloniality, border thinking and epistemic disobedience." *Postcolonial Studies* 14:3, 2011, pp. 273-283. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Accessed 10 Dec 2024.
- . "Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?". *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick, Duke University Press, pp. 106-123.

- "Monster, N., Adv., & Adj." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3193780999>. Accessed 31 Jan. 2025.
- "Monstrous, Adj., Adv., Int., N." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5508492881>. Accessed 31 Jan. 2025.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage International, 2004.
- "Moule." *Le Robert Maxi Plus*. Dictionnaires Le Robert-Sejer, 2018. 690.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press, 2019.
- . *Politiques de l'inimitié*. Éditions La Découverte, 2016.
- Morgan, Jennifer. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. University of Pennsylvania, 2004.
- . *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship and Capitalism in the Early black Atlantic*. Duke University Press, 2021.
- Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Nash, Jennifer. *Birthing Black Mothers*. Duke University Press, 2021.
- Nuttall, Jenni. *Mother Tongue: The Surprising History of Women's Words*. Viking, 2023.
- Paz, Octavio. *The Bow and the Lyre*. McGraw-Hill, 1973.
- Radović, Stanka, and Edouard Glissant. "The Birthplace of Relation: Edouard Glissant's 'Poétique de La Relation: For Ranko.'" *Callaloo*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2007, pp. 475–81. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30129755>. Accessed 18 Dec. 2024.
- Romesín, Humberto Maturana and Gerda Verden-Zöllner. *The Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love*. Digital edition, Andrews UK Limited, 2012.

Schwarz-Bart, Simone. *The Bridge of Beyond*. Translated by Barbara Bray, The New York Review of Books, 2013.

"Settle, V." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5083450555>.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Washington Square Press, 1961.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.

---. *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Shea, Renee H., and Edwidge Danticat. "The Dangerous Job of Edwidge Danticat: An Interview." *Callaloo*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1996, pp. 382–89. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299199>. Accessed 5 Feb. 2025.

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17:2, Summer 1987. 64-81. JSTOR. Accessed 18 Dec. 2024.

Sol, Antoinette Marie. "Histoire(s) et traumatisme(s) : l'infanticide dans le roman féminin antillais." *The French Review* 81 :5 (April 5). 967-984. American Association of Teachers of French. JSTOR.

"Sursis." *Dictionnaire de Français Larousse*, Larousse, www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/sursis/75879#175639. Accessed 10 Nov. 2024.

Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*. Duke University Press, 2018.

Trouillot, Évelyne. *The Infamous Rosalie*. Translated by M. A. Salvadon. University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

---. *Rosalie, l'infâme*. Éditions Dapper, 2003.

Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1:1, 2012, pp. 1-40.

- "Uterus, N." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8091057753>. Accessed 21 Jan. 2025.
- "Ventre." *Le Robert Maxi Plus*. Dictionnaires Le Robert-Sejer, 2018. 1127. Accessed 11 Nov. 2024.
- Vergès, Françoise. *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism*. Translated by Kaiama Glover. Duke University Press, 2020.
- Walcott, Rinaldo. "Genres of Human: Multiculturalism, Cosmo-politics, and the Caribbean Basin." *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick, Duke University Press, pp. 183-202.
- Weinbaum, Alys Eve. *The Afterlife of Reproduction: Biocapitalism and black Feminism's Philosophy of History*. Duke University Press, 2019.
- Wilderson III, Frank B. "Grammar & Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom." *Theatre Survey* 50:1 (May 2009). 119-124. Accessed 14 Feb. 2022.
- "Womb." *Linguee*, Linguee Dictionary, 2024, www.linguee.com/english-french/translation/womb.html. Accessed 11 Nov. 2024.
- "Womb, N." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, www.oed.com/dictionary/womb_n?tl=true. Accessed 11 Nov. 2024.
- Wynter, Sylvia and Katherine McKittrick. "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations." *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick, Duke University Press, pp. 9-89.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "Before Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman.'" *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, edited by Carole Boyce Davis and Elaine Savory Fido, Africa World Press, 1994, pp. 355-372.
- . "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol 3, no 3, Fall 2003, pg 257-337. *Project Muse*.