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## **Discourses of Maternity and the Postmodern Narrative: A Study of Lessing, Walker, and Atwood.**

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of Lessing, Walker, and Atwood**

**Montelaro, Janet J., Ph.D.**

**The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical Col., 1993**

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DISCOURSES OF MATERNITY  
AND THE POSTMODERN NARRATIVE:  
A STUDY OF LESSING, WALKER, AND ATWOOD

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by  
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May 1993

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To my daughter, Elizabeth Marie Montelaro

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## ABSTRACT

Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook, Alice Walker's The Color Purple, and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale are narrated by women whose social identities are partially constructed through activities traditionally associated with mothering. In each text, maternity signifies a biological event as well as the social, sexual, and material relations involved with pregnancy, childbirth, and the nurturing and rearing of children, activities which become grounds for investigating the politics of the body, of sexuality, and consequently, of gender relations. Maternity becomes politicized within the cultural contexts of each novel as maternal experience functions to produce both feminist and postmodernist critiques.

In The Golden Notebook, Lessing manipulates the representation of human emotion to produce social commentary, a technique evident in Bertolt Brecht's stage theory. Lessing's novel contains references to Brecht and uses dramaturgical metaphors to effect Anna Wulf's narrative strategy of emotional distancing. Lessing appropriates Brecht's notion of the *gest* through Anna's discourses on mother-child relations, which function to expose contradictions within the novels "metanarratives" and to question the conventions of heterosexual romance ideology.

In writing The Color Purple, Walker recreates a number of maternal ancestors who participate in the production of this novel as a "womanist" text. The maternal becomes a critical site for challenging forms of sexist and racist oppression, and through the dialogue of Celie's and Nettie's letters, Walker reconceptualizes a Judeo-Christian patriarchal God according to a maternal image. Through a parodic encoding of Jane Eyre in Nettie's narrative, Walker calls attention to women's literary history in an effort to accomodate African-American women writers.

In The Handmaid's Tale, the patriarchal society of Gilead equates women's sexuality with the reproductive-maternal function. Read according to Luce Irigaray's critique of phallogocentrism, Atwood's novel exposes the role of scopophilia in Gilead's subordination of women and its regulation of their sexuality. Visual metaphors such as the convex mirror and its reflection of masculinity in the pregnant Handmaid signify the repression of the feminine. Atwood's textual echoes of John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," like Irigaray's subversive mimicry, serve to deconstruct the specular logic of Gilead's patriarchy.



## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

This study is a feminist and postmodernist reading of three texts by twentieth-century women writers of English fiction: Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook, Alice Walker's The Color Purple, and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Despite their noticeable differences of style, thematics, discursive structure, and national origin, each of these novels investigates the politics of gender by featuring a singular woman narrator whose social identity is partially constructed through the activity of mothering, an experience that discursively shapes her self-representation and offers each narrator a critical perspective from which to examine patriarchal social practices.<sup>1</sup> My discussion of The Golden Notebook, The Color Purple, and The Handmaid's Tale takes into account the fact that maternity indicates a cultural as well as a biological event for women.<sup>2</sup> In each text under consideration, the words "maternity" or "motherhood" do not represent only the narrator's genetic relationship with her child or children, for these terms also signify a range of cultural expectations and social relations extending beyond the activities of giving birth and the nurturing and rearing of children.

Some feminist readers, critics, and theorists, however, are justifiably skeptical of addressing maternity and

mothering as biological categories. They argue that restricting maternity and motherhood to biological definitions limits feminist inquiry, reducing concepts of the maternal to essentialist or ahistorical and therefore merely functionalist classifications.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, critics such as Marianne Hirsch caution against minimizing the theoretical significance of biological maternity as represented in literature by women: "The perspective of the maternal makes it difficult simply to reject the notion of biology and forces us to engage both the meaning of the body and the risks of what has been characterized as essentialist."<sup>4</sup> Even more problematic are the postmodern relations between the body and an increasingly technological Western society which make it difficult to maintain strict nature/culture or essentialist/constructivist divisions, polarities which often become counterproductive from a feminist theoretical standpoint. Eve Sedgwick wryly recalls the "buoyant enthusiasm with which feminist scholars used to greet the finding that one or another form of brutal oppression was not biological but 'only' cultural!"<sup>5</sup> Sedgwick's observation questions the grounds "for our optimism about the malleability of culture by any one group or program" (41).<sup>6</sup>

In considering the meaning of the body in a feminist-materialist analysis of human reproduction in the history of Western thinking, Mary O'Brien points to the devaluation of

childbirth as a chief deficiency in the traditional Marxist appraisal of labor: "Marx defined labor as the creation of value, but he did not heed the value produced by women's reproductive labor" (29).<sup>7</sup> At the same time, O'Brien asks:

Why do we not give the lie to the claim that birth is merely a biological happening, when our sex has universally created reproductive cultures which structure this event in variable but persistent sets of social relations between mothers, sisters, children, midwives, friends, neighbors and, intermittently, men? (13)

The reproductive cultures represented in The Golden Notebook, The Color Purple, and The Handmaid's Tale often become vehicles for politicizing women's maternal experience, creating a range of social relations extending beyond that of the mother and her child. In each of these texts, maternity implies the social, sexual, and material relations within the experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and the nurturing and rearing of children, activities which can become a ground for investigating the politics of the body, the politics of sexuality, and therefore, the politics of gender relations.

My interest in these texts began with the questions of how maternity functions as a signifier of women's experience and how maternal signifiers work to produce social criticism from a feminist and a postmodernist perspective.<sup>8</sup> Each of these novels is concerned with women whose maternal subjectivities emerge through a variety of discourses or

narrative forms which often problematize conventional notions of motherhood and at the same time effectively critique the patriarchal notions underlying the concept of motherhood as a social institution in Western culture.<sup>9</sup> In the realist frames of The Golden Notebook, The Color Purple, and The Handmaid's Tale, maternity becomes an important theme primarily through the narrators' maternal relations with other characters in each novel. As a second discursive function, a semiotics of maternal activity develops in all three texts, with each author constructing tropes around the biological activities of sexual reproduction (conception, gestation, and childbirth) and the social relations of maternal nurturing and childcare. In The Color Purple, for example, Celie, as a maternal subject, rejects the concept of a patriarchal God when she learns of her stepfather's duplicity in posing as her biological father, in removing her two children, and in forcing her to bear the guilt of incest. Both Shug and Nettie suggest to Celie an alternative image of a maternal God that has the potential to dislodge the hegemonic cultural influence of institutional religions based on patriarchal aspects of Christianity. The metaphor of a maternal God, as it occurs in this particular context within The Color Purple, not only counters the abusive paternal authority of Celie's stepfather, but it also produces an historical critique of Judao-Christian theology which renders early twentieth-century African-American

culture vulnerable to that form of religious hypocrisy which Frederick Douglass has justly branded "the Christianity of America."<sup>10</sup>

Central to my argument is that Lessing, Walker, and Atwood construct what I identify as "discourses of maternity" which operate both intertextually and intratextually, and that their tropes of the maternal body becomes the primary sites of gender critique in their fiction. In developing my argument, I draw upon Robert Con Davis's view of the relationship between "text" and "intertext," which interprets "the concept of the 'text' dynamically, as an ongoing operation . . . involving the continual play of referentiality between and within texts."<sup>11</sup> For Davis, the referentiality of the text does not involve merely an internal dynamics of signification; rather, the text reveals through its signifying operations the activity and influence of other texts:

This means that intertextuality, most directly informed by semiotics and derived from the work of structuralism, defines a text as always in process, continually changing its shape. In this view, a text is a fabric simultaneously being woven and unwoven, made up not of a uniform "material" (like the New Critical "paradox" manifested in images) but by the traces of other texts. At an extreme, this definition projects all texts as further divisible into other texts, and these into yet other texts (or signifiers), ad infinitum. (Davis and O'Donnell, x)

Detecting the traces of other texts in reading The Golden Notebook, The Handmaid's Tale, and The Color Purple, I argue that the novels under consideration offer examples of a

peculiarly postmodern form of parody which, according to Davis, "signals an anxiety and an indeterminacy regarding authorial, readerly, or textual identity, the relation of present culture to past, or the function of writing within certain historical and political frameworks" (xiii). In the following chapters, I discuss how the parodic encoding of other texts contributes to the discourses of maternity by examining the intertextual relations between The Golden Notebook and Bertolt Brecht's stage theory, The Color Purple and Jane Eyre, and The Handmaid's Tale and John Ashbery's Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror. Tracing the complex relations between "discourse" and "maternity," as two of the designations in my title suggest, becomes crucial to reading these three texts as examples of feminist as well as postmodernist cultural production.

The Golden Notebook, The Color Purple, and The Handmaid's Tale are complex, multilayered narratives which demand creative reading strategies. To understand how maternity signifies in each text and to map its functions, I find it necessary to take up the critical challenge of contemporary feminist and postmodern theorists whose recent dialogues have influenced my reading of these works. In The Politics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon investigates how feminist critique intersects with postmodernist strategies of cultural production.<sup>12</sup> While Hutcheon sees feminism and postmodernism as "part of the same general crisis of

cultural authority," she maintains a rigid distinction between their theoretical realms (142). According to her analysis, all postmodern art forms share a singular representational strategy, that of a parodic "double encoding as both complicity and critique" (153). Hutcheon's theory of literary parody locates the simultaneously complicitous and critical discursive maneuvers in a textual practice which "inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world" (11). In arguing that feminism operates in terms of "distinct, unambiguous political agendas of resistance" while postmodernism does not, Hutcheon credits feminism with having "radicalized the postmodern sense of difference and de-naturalized the traditional historiographic separation of the private and the public--and the personal and the political" (142).<sup>13</sup>

In this regard Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson take the feminist-postmodernist dialogue a step further by postulating a postmodern-feminist criticism. In their essay "Social Criticism without Philosophy," Fraser and Nicholson ask how theorists might "combine a postmodernist incredulity toward metanarratives with the social-critical power of feminism?"<sup>14</sup> Whereas Hutcheon sees no theoretical ground for the conflation of postmodernism and feminism, Fraser and Nicholson suggest some practical ways in which the two theories can complement each other. First, in arguing that

postmodern-feminist inquiry "need forswear neither large historical narratives nor analyses of societal macrostructures," Fraser and Nicholson point to the historical persistence of sexism and the varied cultural practices of patriarchy which demand analysis of "sexism in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity" (34). Second, they call for a theoretical practice which is culturally specific while stressing the explicit differences between cultures. At the same time, such an approach would be historically specific with definite historical institutions "like the modern, restricted, male-headed, nuclear family taking precedence over ahistorical, functionalist categories like reproduction and mothering" (34). When reproduction and mothering are selected as focused categories, "they would be genealogized, that is, framed by a historical narrative and rendered temporally and culturally specific" (34).

Furthermore, Fraser and Nicholson reject any universalizing tendencies in theory formation which would blunt the postmodern-feminist emphasis on difference, focusing instead on comparativist models of analysis which are flexible while neither absolutist nor generalizing. In keeping with the postmodernist suspicion toward meta-narratives, Fraser and Nicholson would have "unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity" defer to the more diversified "plural and complexly constructed conceptions of



social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others" (34-35).

Finally, Fraser and Nicholson recommend a versatile and pragmatic approach in pursuing a postmodern-feminist inquiry:

In general, postmodern-feminist theory would be pragmatic and fallibilistic. It would tailor its methods and categories to the specific task at hand, using multiple categories when appropriate and forswearing the metaphysical comfort of a single feminist method or feminist epistemology. In short, this theory would look more like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues than one woven in a single color. (35)

Along with other feminist theorists of postmodernism, Fraser and Nicholson agree that women universally share no single concern nor one specific opponent. As a result, postmodern-feminist theoretical practice sees women's common concerns and women's common opponents as "interlaced with differences and even conflicts," and therefore demanding "a patchwork of overlapping alliances" to work on behalf of a variety of discernable feminist agendas.<sup>15</sup>

In my readings of The Golden Notebook, The Color Purple, and The Handmaid's Tale, I draw upon Hutcheon's theory of postmodern parody and also respond to the critical challenge of Fraser and Nicholson by weaving together a variety of feminist analytical approaches in order to confront specific gender issues in the unique cultural and historical contexts of each novel.<sup>16</sup> In concluding my prefatory comments, I offer brief historical frameworks for

reading The Golden Notebook, The Color Purple, and The Handmaid's Tale. I also sketch my reading strategies for each text and outline the discursive functions of maternity as they contribute to each narrator's critique of patriarchy. My readings demonstrate that the categories of reproduction and mothering, instead of remaining ahistorical and essentialist, can be effectively "genealogized" as they are appropriated for feminist-postmodernist cultural practice and that they become the primary vehicles for locating and historicizing the contradictions and conflicts of women's oppression which comprise the gender politics of each novel.<sup>17</sup>

With its publication in 1962, The Golden Notebook occupies the threshold between the modern and postmodern literary periods.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps of more significance to women readers, however, is the fact that Lessing's novel appeared one year before the publication of Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, which "sounded the cry for the second wave of feminism."<sup>19</sup> In her 1971 Introduction to The Golden Notebook, Lessing claims that she never intended her novel to be "a trumpet for Women's Liberation," since the "book was written as if the attitudes that have been created by the Women's Liberation movements already existed."<sup>20</sup> But as Mona Knapp has observed, contemporary feminist studies "demonstrate that most women still suffer from the problems that concerned Anna Wulf and 1960s feminists:

stereotyped and exploitative relationships, division of roles between motherhood and the workplace, and lack of support from a (still) largely male-oriented world."<sup>21</sup> Although these explicit feminist concerns are central to my understanding of The Golden Notebook, my reading of Lessing's narrative investigates her strategies of feminist critique as extending beyond these specific women's issues into other political realms which are represented in her novel.

In Chapter One, "The Dialectics of Maternal Discourse in Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook," I point to the dialectical tensions between Free Women and the four notebooks through the different narrative perspectives of each "text": whereas Free Women is told by an omniscient narrator, the notebooks are largely written from Anna Wulf's personal viewpoint. Mothering recurs as a prominent activity of women throughout "The Notebooks" and Free Women sections of The Golden Notebook. In the context of the social history of post-war Britain and America, women's social identities were usually formed in the contexts of marriage, domesticity, and maternity. Lessing often uses the theme of mothering to bridge traditional oppositions between the public and private spheres. For example, mother-child relations become a means of questioning British colonial rule in Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia), which prevailed for almost an entire century (1888-1980).

Anna's Black Notebook develops into a scathing indictment of British imperialism through her personal and local narrative set in Rhodesia about an illicit and interracial love affair between George Hounslow and the married servant Marie, their child representing both the contradictions of the patriarchal appropriation of children and the imperialist appropriation of the material resources that constitute a culture.

The omnipresent subtext of The Golden Notebook is Anna's concern about critical distance in her writing, an anxiety which she carries into her personal relationships as a process of emotionally distancing herself from experience. Manifestations of Anna's anxiety include her experience of writer's block, her fear of psychological breakdown, and her emotional manipulation by male lovers, symptoms which she describes as producing feelings of alienation. Much of Anna's authorial discourse about critical distance and alienation call to mind Bertolt Brecht's ideas about the role of empathy in artistic production, especially his dramatic technique of the "A-effect," or defamiliarization. In fact, The Golden Notebook echoes many ideas from Brechtian stage theory, and my reading of the novel is indebted to contemporary feminist theorists of drama whose intertextual readings of feminist and Brechtian theories produce gender critique. According to Elin Diamond, "when gender is 'alienated' or foregrounded, the spectator [or

reader] is enabled to see a sign system as a sign system."<sup>22</sup> Defamiliarization is part of the representational process which creates the Brechtian Gestus: "a gesture, a word, an action, a tableau by which, separately or in series, the social attitudes encoded in the playtext become visible to the spectator" (Diamond 89). According to Brecht, the significance of the gest becomes social when it "allows conclusions to be drawn about social circumstances."<sup>23</sup>

In my reading of The Golden Notebook, I also demonstrate that Lessing enhances the theme of mothering in the conventional story of Free Women by creating a figurative language in the Notebooks based on sexual reproduction, childbirth, and other maternal activity. This maternal figuration fulfills a specific discursive function which has the effect of Brecht's social gestus, in that discourse about mothers and the troping of sexual reproduction and experience of mothering occurs in seemingly alien contexts in Lessing's novel, exposing the social contradictions for women and other disempowered subjects who live under the constraints of patriarchal society. For example, Anna describes the formation of Communist subgroups and the dialectical tensions within the Communist Party as processes of birth and gestation, metaphors calling attention to the Marxist tendency which has relegated the activities of procreation and the reproduction of human

labor to the domestic sphere. Similar to her condemnation of the hegemonic practice of colonial politics in the Black Notebook, Anna's examination of the Communist Party and its philosophy exposes the blindness of Marxist thought regarding the value of women's reproductive and mothering roles as well as the Party's often sexist hierarchical structure of "father figures."

In the Yellow Notebook, Anna's fiction represents how the supposed equality of heterosexual relations become dominated by men, who insist on transforming their sexual relations with women into narcissistic mother-child relationships. The Blue Notebook becomes a critique of the universalizing claims of Jungian archetypal stages, which Anna discusses with her maternal analyst Mrs. Marks, nicknamed "Mother Sugar." By insisting on the uniqueness of her experience as a woman in a specific historical and political context, Anna eventually rejects aspects of Jungian theory and ends her childlike dependence on her "mother" analyst. The four notebooks not only record Anna Wulf's suspicion of metanarratives, but they also deconstruct the dichotomies between the personal and political that conventional ideas of mothering would maintain as separate.

Like The Golden Notebook, Alice Walker's The Color Purple also addresses the social contradictions inherent in women's reproductive and mothering roles. These

contradictions as they occur within African-American culture are best approached by Afro-centric mothering theorists such as Barbara Christian, who point to the fact that while childbirth marks a rite of passage in the process of physical maturation for many African-American women, their reproductive roles have historically been manipulated by racist and sexist ideologies in the United States, beginning with the reproduction of slave labor. Hortense Spillers explains how the African-American experience of childbirth during slavery became commodified by the slave master who could speculate in the trading of human flesh, of both mother and child, for his own profit.<sup>24</sup> The denial of the African-American slave's kinship system and the appropriation of the reproductive capacity of female slaves for the increase of profit contribute to what Spillers calls the "cultural unmaking" of African peoples brought to the United States.

One aspect of the process of cultural unmaking is the obliteration of gender identities of African-American slaves. For Spillers, "'gendering' takes place within the confines of the domestic." According to her argument, domesticity is a culturally-specific construct, created "by way of a common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names . . . which, in turn, situates those persons it 'covers' in a particular place" (72). Gender loses its specific cultural meaning

when kinship systems, proper names, and identification with place (or home) are destroyed. Spillers maintains that if the gender category of femininity loses all cultural signification within the institution of slavery in the United States, "then so does 'motherhood' as female blood-rite/right" (75). Under the institution of slavery, women could not claim their own children since both mother and child were the legal property of the slave owner who often fathered slave children without conferring upon them the social benefits of paternity. As Spillers's project of historicizing the contradictory relations of African-American maternity unfolds, she looks to the category of "motherhood" as an investigative approach to "the problematics of gender": "motherhood and female gendering/ungendering appear so intimately aligned that they seem to speak the same language" (78).<sup>25</sup> The narratives of the African diaspora and African-American captivity testify to the removal of the female slave from "the traditional symbolics of female gender," problematizing her identity as a social subject and situating her as a victim of misnaming under the dominant symbolic order (80).

Spillers's insight into the erasure of gender and motherhood as categories of female identity in African-American culture may not seem an immediately relevant historical context in which to read The Color Purple. Although published in 1982, exactly twenty years after The



Golden Notebook, Walker's novel is set during the early decades of twentieth-century African-American communities, scarcely one generation removed from slavery.<sup>26</sup> Spillers's focus on the "total objectification" of female bodies and the "ungendering" of African "female flesh" are residual elements in the constitution of many of the female subjects in Walker's novel. For example, the thematics described by Spillers are represented by Walker through the story of Mary Agnes, who is raped by a warden when she tries to effect a change in Sofia's sentence from imprisonment to compulsory domestic service. Mary Agnes, who also functions as a surrogate mother to the children of Harpo and Sofia, dresses according to the proper gender code "like she a white woman," in order to command the respectful attention of the white warden who is also her uncle.<sup>27</sup> After identifying herself by naming her mother and grandparents, Mary Agnes claims her relationship with the warden. Like the slave master who refuses to acknowledge his kinship ties with his black descendents, the warden literally removes the "clothing" of Mary Agnes's gender identity. The sexual violation of Mary Agnes is referred to in terms of the warden's ordering her to undress, enacting what Spillers terms the "materialized scene of unprotected female flesh . . . ungended" (Spillers 68).<sup>28</sup> The rape of Mary Agnes represents the warden's rejection of her identity as both female relation and woman whose social relations include

that of wife and mother. Designated by her nickname "Squeak" until this point in the narrative, Mary Agnes responds to the warden's violence by "re-presenting" her identity and assuming her given name; therefore, she announces on her return home, "My name Mary Agnes, she say."<sup>29</sup>

The scene of gender negation is repeated in the mayor's denial of Sofia's motherhood. After the release of Sofia from prison, her labor is appropriated by the mayor's family who disregards her relationship with her children and allows her to visit them only once a year. Gender negation of African-American women in Walker's novel is also enacted by men of their own race: Celie is deprived of her childhood and family identity as daughter when her stepfather rapes her. In an attempt to distract Alfonso from committing the same abuse with Nettie, Celie readjusts her gender identity by dressing in "horsehair, feathers, and a pair of our new mammy high heel shoes" (17). Responding with a child's logic, Celie dresses according to the gender role which she thinks will successfully deter Alfonso. But the gender identity Celie innocently assumes only reminds him of his crimes of effacing her role as daughter and substituting that of a prostitute. As a result, Celie writes that "He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway" (17). In the cases of Celie, Sofia, and Mary Agnes, the erasure of their gender intersects with their role and responsibilities as mothers within a particular family or household. Walker's

novel can be read as a social and historical text since it represents twentieth-century conflicts and contradictions about African-American mothering which can be historically traced to the erasure of women's gender identity and social anonymity during slavery.

In Chapter Two, "Producing a Womanist Text: The Maternal as Signifier in Alice Walker's The Color Purple," I outline Walker's effort to construct a tradition of women's artistic contributions within the framework of African-American cultural production. In her landmark essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker illustrates the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of tracing the artistic production of African-American foremothers under the historical constraints of slavery and racial segregation. Spillers project, however, problematizes Walker's task since the identification of African-American foremothers is doubly complicated by women's loss of gender identity and the erasure of matrilineal ties in the historical context of African-American captivity.

In The Color Purple, African-American women who participate in mothering are frequently victimized by other men and women, both black and white, who act as agents of the hegemonic patriarchal and racist ideologies which separate women from their children; at the same time, Walker's narrative is subversive in that many women characters who participate in childbearing, nurturing and

childrearing often refuse to be contained by the social conventions which define motherhood as an institution. In discussing African-American motherhood in The Color Purple, I employ bell hooks's theory of marginalization by defining mothering in Walker's novel as both a "site of repression" and a "site of resistance."<sup>30</sup>

Walker's narrative also participates in what Hutcheon terms the postmodern "parodic encoding" of other texts. Critics such as Elaine Showalter describe The Color Purple as a narrative quilt, emblematic of the artistic needlework produced from refuse media by African-American foremothers whose aesthetic contributions Walker honors through textual parody: "Walker weaves references to three classic texts by black male writers into her narrative: Jean Toomer's Cane, The Autobiography of Malcolm X, and Alex Haley's Roots."<sup>31</sup> In discussing what I refer to as the political subtexts of Nettie's letters in The Color Purple, I address the issue of intertextuality as part of my discussion of Corrine's "crisis" over the maternal identity of her adopted children. Corrine's crisis in response to her children's origin becomes an occasion for Walker to inaugurate several "discourses of maternity" in her narrative: Celie's questioning of her belief in a paternal God, whom she transforms into a maternal image; the disillusionment of Samuel, Corrine, and Nettie, whose return to their "maternal origins" in Africa as part of the ideology of racial uplift

exposes their missionary intervention as complicitous with Western imperialism; and the "parodic encoding" of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre into the narrative of Corinne's maternal crisis as an occasion for Walker's questioning of the status of African-American literature by women in the Anglo-American canon. By creating The Color Purple as a multilayered discourse and intertextual narrative, Walker represents the complexities and contradictions of African-American maternal identity which historical records and contemporary experience are still negotiating.

The complexities and contradictions of mothering are no less apparent in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, a fictional analogue to the historical division of women into classes corresponding to their different sexual functions. To the extent that Atwood represents the generative, nurturing, and erotic functions of women as separate sexual "divisions of labor," the novel participates in what Linda Hutcheon terms the "general problematizing of the body and its sexuality" (Politics 142). For Hutcheon, a critical reading of the representations of "the body and its subject positions" becomes the scene of feminist and postmodern dialogue (142).

The Handmaid's Tale presents a scene of crisis for all North American women. Caucasian women (Atwood understates the racist dimensions of this dystopian regime), especially those of childbearing age and ability, have become the

victims of social engineering by a patriarchal government of elderly "Commanders" who reside in the cultural center of "Gilead" and whose endorsement of religious fundamentalism assigns value to women according to their reproductive function. Published in 1986, Atwood's futuristic novel is set in a police state besieged by religious wars, food shortages, and the debilitating effects of environmental pollution. The "Handmaids" of the story have been chosen by the government strictly for the purpose of childbearing. Each Commander, along with his "Wife" and his assigned "Handmaid," participates in regular copulation rituals as a strategy to offset the population decline of the ruling elite.

However, the division of women according to sexual function is actually an elaborate ruse to contain women's sexuality, since those women who are chosen as Handmaids have not conformed to the ideology of the ruling class: therefore, "candidates" for Handmaids may be selected from lesbians who have repented of "gender treachery"; women who have been divorced, remarried, and have had children in prior marriages; religious women who have renounced their faith and have "converted" to the beliefs of the ruling class; women who have had abortions before the ascendancy of the current regime and who have been reindoctrinated to desire the experience of childbirth; and finally, any independent, or single, or working woman whose social

containment would otherwise be impossible under the sexual constraints of Gilead. All other "undesirable"<sup>32</sup> women fall into one of three possible classes: those who serve an erotic function are placed at "Jezebel's" as prostitutes; those who are too old or too incorrigible to reproduce are sent to the outskirts of Gilead as "Unwomen" who clean the environment of toxic pollutants; those who represent the serving class are called "Marthas"; and those who represent the economic subclass are labeled "Econowives." Although Wives of Commanders and Econowives may also bear children, Handmaids represent the institutionalization of the maternal function within Gilead. Atwood's conflation of women's sexual function and social class in The Handmaid's Tale calls to mind Gerda Lerner's explanation of the historical origins of patriarchy, whereby the "roles and behavior deemed appropriate to the sexes . . . became part of the cultural construct and explanatory system."<sup>33</sup>

In Chapter Three of this study, "Maternity and the Ideology of Sexual Difference in The Handmaid's Tale," I read Atwood's novel intertextually with Luce Irigaray's This Sex Which Is Not One.<sup>34</sup> Irigaray describes patriarchy as "the dominant scopic economy" which signifies women's "consignment to passivity" (26);<sup>35</sup> therefore, the visual determinants of color-coding women's clothing according to their sexual functions in The Handmaid's Tale become a vile joke about women's subordination when read according to

Irigaray's understanding of female sexuality as distinct from its reproductive function. Irigaray accuses Freud of "sexual indifference" for his privileging of the reproductive function as the principle determinant of women's sexuality: "The desire to obtain the penis from the father is replaced by the desire to have a child" (41). Gilead's imposition of the reproductive function on all women raises a theoretical question posed by Irigaray: "the question of what the social status of women might be--in particular through its differentiation from a simple, reproductive-maternal function" (128). Focusing on the potentially liberatory erotic function of women, Irigaray asks whether "the female sex might possibly have its own specificity?" (69). Gilead's attempt to establish women's subjectivity by appealing to women's "sexual difference" through the reproductive-maternal function thus represents the classic Freudian sexual "indifference" described by Irigaray.

The Handmaid's Tale also operates as an intertextual discourse which functions according to Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody. In my reading of Atwood's novel, I trace its textual echoes of John Ashbery's poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" that thematizes the masculine attribute of specularly which Atwood parodies. Atwood's parodic engagement with Ashbery focuses attention on the limits of postmodern self-reflexivity as well as the self-



absorbing narcissism which fuels the masculine specular economy. The convex morphology of Parmigianino's self-portrait, represented in Ashbery's poem, is transformed into the distorting pier glass which appears in The Handmaid's Tale. As a signifier of the specular logic of Gilead which constrains women, the convex pier glass also becomes a metaphor for the Handmaid's pregnant body as it reflects the patriarchal control of women's reproductive function.

The historical context of Atwood's composition of The Handmaid's Tale can be partially reconstructed from Marilyn French's account of the campaign for abortion rights in Canada.<sup>36</sup> Although abortions in Canada have been lawful in principle for over a decade, women have had to petition doctors for the procedure to be performed in a hospital, since there were no abortion clinics in the early 1980s. In 1988, two years after the publication of Atwood's novel, the Canadian Supreme Court finally decriminalized abortion clinics although access to abortions remains difficult. The Handmaid's Tale, written in the heat of Canadian and American debates over abortion, anticipated many of the conflicts over abortion rights that occurred in Canada and the United States after 1986 when her novel first appeared. The U.S. Constitutional right to abortion, *Roe v. Wade* (1973), has not survived two decades without serious curtailment in the Supreme Court by secular and religious anti-abortion forces in the United States. The contemporary

religious and political imperative to confine American women to a strict reproductive-maternal function mark Atwood's novel as politically relevant to North American women of the twenty-first century.

In the preceding discussion, I have sketched relevant historical contexts for discussing the textual implications of maternity and mothering in The Golden Notebook, The Color Purple, and The Handmaid's Tale. In the following chapters, I outline a range of discourses about maternity which arguably qualifies these three texts as examples of feminist-postmodern fiction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While my study does not minimize the biological fact of maternity, I take seriously Nicole-Claude Mathieu's concern that the mother be seen "as a fully social subject":  
In the present state of analysis, the real social subject of maternity is the child, not the woman.  
 In focusing on the mother as the psycho-biological locus for the child, there is every chance that the woman as a social subject will be forgotten: she is in fact thought of more as the object than as the subject of maternity. (64)  
 See "Biological Paternity, Social Maternity," Feminist Issues (Spring 1984): 63-72.

<sup>2</sup> See Mary O'Brien, Reproducing the World: Essays in Feminist Theory (Boulder: Westview, 1989) 231. Further references are cited within the text.

<sup>3</sup> These specific cautions are stated by Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson in their essay "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," in Feminism/Postmodernism, Linda J. Nicholson, ed. (London: Routledge, 1990) 34. Further references are cited within the text.

<sup>4</sup> The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 12.

<sup>5</sup> See Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley: U of California, 1990) 41. Further references are cited within the text.

<sup>6</sup> Sedgwick's antihomophobic project deconstructs the dualism between nature and culture in that "the debate participates in a tradition of viewing culture as malleable relative to nature: that is, culture, unlike nature, is assumed to be the thing that can be changed; the thing in which 'humanity' has, furthermore, a right or even an obligation to intervene" (41).

<sup>7</sup> Defying the risks of being labeled "essentialist," O'Brien offers a dialectical analysis of women's reproductive experience: First, she argues that the differently gendered activity of human reproduction becomes "the material ground for reproductive consciousness" (14). Next, she distinguishes the experience of alienation in the act of paternity from women's experience of maternity: For women, "childbirth is a mode of alienation mediated in women's labor" upon which "varying sets of social relations" are built in order to meet the needs of the "mother laborer" and "product of reproductive labor, the infant" (14). Those

who dismiss her argument are still left in the untenable position of having to account for the material value of reproductive labor.

<sup>8</sup> For a contemporary semiological approach to maternity as thematized in the cultural production of nineteenth-century women writers and visual artists, see Jane Silverman van Buren's The Modernist Madonna: Semiotics of the Maternal Metaphor, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989). In her introduction, van Buren offers an extensive analysis and summation of a range of formal psychoanalytic theories of the maternal, extending from Freud to Klein (1-24).

<sup>9</sup> One of the first serious social critiques of the institution of motherhood in the twentieth century is found in Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (1949; Paris: Librairie Gallimard; New York: Knopf, 1952). In disabusing popular notions concerning the cult of the mother, Beauvoir states that "no maternal 'instinct' exists: the word hardly applies, in any case, to the human species" (511). Beauvoir attacks two false assumptions inherent in conventional notions of motherhood: first, "that maternity is enough in all cases to crown a woman's life" (521); second, "that the child is sure of being happy in its mother's arms" (523). She continues, "There is no such thing as an 'unnatural mother,' to be sure, since there is nothing natural about maternal love; but, precisely for that reason, there are bad mothers" (523).

<sup>10</sup> See the "Appendix" to Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of an American Slave where Douglass contrasts "the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ" to "the corrupt, slave-holding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land." The Heath Anthology of American Literature vol. 1, ed. Paul Lauter, et al. (Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1990) 1700-1701.

<sup>11</sup> See Robert Con Davis and Patrick O'Donnell, eds., Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) ix-x.

<sup>12</sup> The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1989). All page references are cited within the text.

<sup>13</sup> While I agree with Hutcheon up to this point, I take issue with her argument that, at most, feminism can only make use of postmodernist parodic strategies and that the identification of feminism with postmodernism would nullify feminist political agendas. The theoretical question which Hutcheon does not investigate is whether or not feminist

inquiry, in politicizing postmodern cultural practices, can produce its own brand of postmodern art.

<sup>14</sup> See Feminism/Postmodernism, 34. Here, Fraser and Nicholson examine Nancy Chodorow's theory of mothering as one example of feminist metanarrative.

<sup>15</sup> Hutcheon, Fraser, and Nicholson acknowledge a plural "practice of feminisms," a concept which Hutcheon endorses in recognizing "that there is no clear cultural consensus in feminist thinking about representation" (The Politics of the Postmodern, 141).

<sup>16</sup> The argument that the fiction of Doris Lessing, Alice Walker, and Margaret Atwood represents both feminist and postmodern cultural production has already been forwarded by Molly Hite, who reads the feminist valuation of marginality as complicitous with a postmodernist emphasis on the decentered subject:

In particular, experimental fictions by women seem to share the decentering and disseminating strategies of postmodernist narratives, but they also seem to arrive at these strategies by an entirely different route, which involves emphasizing conventionally marginal characters and themes, in this way re-centering the value structure of the narrative.

See The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) 2. In this essay, Hite focuses primarily on three texts: Lessing's The Golden Notebook, Walker's The Color Purple, and Atwood's Lady Oracle. Hite's attention to the marginalized women characters of each novel coincides with the postmodern emphasis on marginal subjectivities which Linda Hutcheon terms "ex-centric positionalities." See Hutcheon's A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (New York: Routledge, 1988) 68.

However, by identifying postmodernism as practically synonymous with experimental fiction, Hite not only sidesteps the theoretical engagement between feminism and postmodernism but offers no new possible feminist intervention into postmodern cultural practices.

<sup>17</sup> See also Ivy Schweitzer, "Maternal Discourse and the Romance of Self-Possession in Kate Chopin's The Awakening," boundary 2 17.1 (1990): 158-156; and Jane Silverman Van Buren, The Modernist Madonna: Semiotics of the Maternal Metaphor. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.

<sup>18</sup> Pedagogical approaches to The Golden Notebook include this novel under both rubrics of modernism and postmodernism. See Approaches to Teaching Lessing's "The

Golden Notebook," Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose, eds. (New York: MLA, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> See Michele Wender Zak and Patricia A. Moots, eds., "Feminism: The Second Wave" in Women and the Politics of Culture (New York: Longman, 1983) 376.

<sup>20</sup> The Golden Notebook (New York: Bantam, 1962) ix.

<sup>21</sup> See "The Golden Notebook: A Feminist Context for the Classroom," in Kaplan and Rose, 108.

<sup>22</sup> See "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," Drama Review 32.1 (1988): 85.

<sup>23</sup> See Brecht on Theatre, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964) 104-05.

<sup>24</sup> See "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Diacritics (Summer 1987) 78. The critical impetus of Spiller's essay is directed toward the "misnaming" of African-American family relations as "matriarchal" in the 1965 U.S. Department of Labor Report by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action."

<sup>25</sup> Spillers is aware of the theoretical tensions within feminist discourse "between female gender and mothering" when she states:

. . . feminist inquiry/praxis and the actual day-to-day living of numberless American women--black and white--have gone far to break the enthrallment of a female subject-position to the theoretical and actual situation of maternity. (78)

Her justification of using motherhood as a theoretical approach to questions of gender is that the historical experience of uncertainty of African-American women regarding the future of their children's lives within slavery "insinuates an implicit and unresolved puzzle both within current feminist discourse and within those discursive communities that investigate the entire problematics of culture" (78).

<sup>26</sup> The central action of The Color Purple spans a twenty-year period, from the 1920s to almost the end of World War II. Although Walker never reveals a precise date in her novel, some of the more prominent historical markers within the narrative include Nettie's witness to the active cultural growth of black communities in New York City. This cultural phenomenon known as the Harlem renaissance began on February 17, 1919, with the triumphant victory march of the Fifteenth Regiment of New York's National Guard, comprised

of thirteen hundred African-Americans, who paraded from Manhattan to Harlem. See David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue (New York: Oxford UP, 1979). Another historical marker in the novel is Samuel's allusion to the African-American educator and cultural leader W.E.B. DuBois:

I remember once, before Corrine and I were married, Samuel continued, Aunt Theodosia had one of her at-homes. She had them every Thursday. She'd invited a lot of "serious young people" as she called them, and one of them was a young Harvard scholar named Edward. DuBoyce was the last name, I think. (The Color Purple 209)

Another clear historical marker in the Walker's text refers to the continued conflict of World War II. The telegram Celie receives near the end of the novel has been sent by the United States Department of Defense, mistakenly informing Celie that a ship carrying Nettie, Samuel, Olivia, and Adam "was sunk by German mines off the coast of someplace call Gibraltar" (225).

<sup>27</sup> The Color Purple, (New York: Washington Square, 1982) 92.

<sup>28</sup> Spillers demonstrates her equation of "the captive body" as "a metaphor for value":

Even though the captive flesh/body has been "liberated," and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (68)

<sup>29</sup> See The Color Purple, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982) 95. Further references are cited within the text.

<sup>30</sup> See bell hooks, "Marginality as Site of Resistance," in Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, ed. Russell Ferguson et. al. (Cambridge: MIT, 1990) 341-43. Further references are cited within the text.

<sup>31</sup> See Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 20. Showalter also reads The Color Purple as "an act of homage to Zora Neale Hurston, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Flannery O'Connor" (20).

<sup>32</sup> Men and women who represent the wide range of North American racial and ethnic minorities in The Handmaid's Tale completely vanish from the narrative, their disappearance implying that only a highly selective tradition of patriarchal society is being reproduced in Gilead.

<sup>33</sup> See The Creation of Patriarchy (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 212. Further references are cited within the text.

According to Lerner, "The sexuality of women, consisting of their sexual and their reproductive capacities and services, was commodified even prior to the creation of Western civilization," since the exchange of women among men began with the "development of agriculture in the Neolithic period" (212). Lerner's understanding of the classification of women's social roles according to sexual function, "expressed and constituted in terms of patriarchal relations," demonstrates that class and gender are inseparable constructs when analyzing the history of women's social oppression (213).

<sup>34</sup> Originally published in French, Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un (1977), is translated into English by Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985). Further references are cited within the text.

<sup>35</sup> According to Irigaray's analysis of patriarchy, women's subjectivity is constrained by a dominating male logic of dualism which attributes passivity and activity respectively to women's and men's gender construction. As actants in the dominant scopic economy, men eroticize visual pleasure by fetishizing women as "the beautiful object of contemplation" (26).

<sup>36</sup> See The War Against Women (New York: Summit, 1992) 92-94. Further references are cited within the text.



## CHAPTER 2

### The Dialectics of Maternal Discourse in Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook

Critical approaches to The Golden Notebook often call attention to Doris Lessing's complex narrative form as an index to understanding the complicated, fragmented, and sometimes contradictory social identities of the novel's heroine, Anna Freeman Wulf.<sup>1</sup> However, the extent to which Lessing constructs Anna as a woman whose writing is informed by her social experience as a mother has received less attention.<sup>2</sup> Judith Kegan Gardiner's reading of The Golden Notebook attempts to correct this oversight by refocusing critical attention on maternal aspects of this novel.<sup>3</sup> According to Gardiner, empathy inflects Lessing's narrative whereby Anna "associates the personal, emotional, and psychological with the feminine and with both the positive and negative aspects of motherhood" (146). Arguing that Lessing's discursive strategies "thematize empathy and represent it structurally through the manipulation of narrative point of view" (153), Gardiner endorses a definition of empathy offered by psychologist Heinz Kohut:

[Empathy] is a value-neutral tool of observation.  
. . . We define it as 'vicarious introspection'  
or, more simply, as one person's (attempt to)  
experience the inner life of another while  
simultaneously retaining the stance of an  
objective observer. (Gardiner 2)

Gardiner's endorsement of Kohut's definition of empathy, however, ignores obviously questionable assumptions, such as the possibility of a "value-neutral tool of observation."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Gardiner seems untroubled about how such a value-free "tool" could exist in a specific social or historical context. The illusory stance of the "objective observer" and the inherently scopic enterprise of "vicarious introspection" more readily translate as masculinist concepts rather than feminine traits.<sup>5</sup>

Gardiner situates the concept of empathy within "contemporary 'mothering theory,' a reformulation of object relations psychoanalysis that purports to be truer to women's experience than orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis" (2).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, she qualifies this perspective by cautioning that contemporary mothering theorists, in overemphasizing women's interdependency (especially through the mother-daughter bond), "may instead idealize women's traits, and [that] they thus tend to sentimentalize empathy as loving and nurturant understanding" (2). On the other hand, contemporary readings of The Golden Notebook have not sufficiently examined the functions of sentimentality and empathy as they are situated within the larger context of Lessing's critical approach to the emotions in this novel.

Undoubtedly, empathy remains a problematic concept in The Golden Notebook, and my reading of this novel examines the representation and status of empathy in Lessing's

discourse. While Gardiner explores Anna's seemingly precarious identity as a process of shifting back and forth between empathetic identifications with others and what she terms the "reversing of maternal empathy" whereby Anna converts "the other into the self" (151), I treat empathy as a symptom of a complex maternal code within Anna's writings which can be useful in understanding Lessing's critical treatment of the emotions. Many of Anna's intellectual conflicts arise because of her inability to experience emotion or because of her purposeful emotional self-distancing in her writing about personal experience. At other times, Anna's writings display a self-conscious and affected sentimentality, a less frequent but nevertheless conspicuous discursive effect which becomes an occasion for further introspection in the notebooks. Anna's authorial responses of emotional distancing and exaggerated sentimentality figure prominently in her writing about her different relationships, including those affecting her daughter, her lovers, her ideas about writing, and her political activities. In fact, Anna's conflicting emotions in these relationships demonstrate that her social identity as a mother does not necessarily enhance her capacity for empathy.

By representing Anna as a maternal figure whose writing often establishes an affective critical distance, Lessing creates a narrative strategy which interrogates

stereotypical notions that associate the feminine and the maternal with "the personal, emotional, and psychological" (Gardiner 146). In The Golden Notebook, Lessing represents Anna as transgressing traditional boundaries between the personal and the political, an ideological division which often contains women whose social identities are partially constructed through activities involving motherhood. When Anna obstructs empathic identification in her writing, she does so in order to examine her personal relationships as well as to reflect on public and political issues that define the historical background of the novel, such as the activity of the British Communist Party in post-war England or the impact of British colonialism in Rhodesia.

In The Golden Notebook, Lessing problematizes empathy by manipulating the representation of human emotion to produce social commentary, a strategy similar to Bertolt Brecht's treatment of the emotions in his stage theory. In the first section of this chapter, I trace some of the prominent similarities between Brecht's views on the emotions in his stage theory and Lessing's use of the emotions in The Golden Notebook. I argue that Lessing's direct references to Brecht and her extensive literary adaptation of Brechtian techniques of epic theater in The Golden Notebook can be considered a form of postmodern parody, which according to Linda Hutcheon, emerges as "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic

signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity."<sup>7</sup> Through the use of Brechtian-feminist theories of contemporary theatre, I argue that Lessing's parodic encoding of Brecht signals this postmodern ironic difference by placing his theatrical innovations, which were specifically intended to investigate class relations, in the service of feminist inquiry into gender relations in the novel.<sup>8</sup> I conclude the section by demonstrating how the concept of the Brechtian social *gestus* contributes to Lessing's creation of a maternal *gest* which has the political function of exposing social contradiction.

Recent criticism of The Golden Notebook demonstrates that Anna Wulf's writing demystifies the totalizing pretence of various political and economic systems as well as psychological theories presented in the novel.<sup>9</sup> In the second part of this chapter, I examine how Lessing intervenes in these totalizing systems through Anna Wulf's writing from a maternal perspective. Specifically, Anna's discourse makes use of mother-child relations to articulate some of the central conflicts of the novel which revolve around issues directly related to Communist party activity, British colonialism in Rhodesia, Jungian psychology, and the ethos of capitalist culture. By placing mother-child relations in a dialectical engagement with the economic, political, and psychological theories or metanarratives presented in The Golden Notebook, aspects of gender and

class become defamiliarized in such traditionally oppositional contexts, allowing for theoretical revisioning of gender and class relations and the possibility of social change. Moreover, the use of the mother-child relationship operates like the Brechtian gest, which functions to reveal the social contradictions in a given situation. Lessing's use of maternal relations in this novel exposes contradictions within the presumably logical and coherent thinking that informs each metanarrative, underscoring the conventional separation between private and public spheres. In this way, the dialectical engagement of the personal and political realms in The Golden Notebook cooperates with the postmodern agenda in its suspicion of metanarratives.

Finally, Anna's critical distance enables her to analyze the social oppression of women by exposing the contradictions within heterosexual "romance" ideology. In the third section of this chapter, I argue that through Anna's maternal perspective, Lessing demonstrates how power and authority accrue to men in heterosexual relationships through men's emotional manipulation of women, placing restraints on both their maternal and erotic activities. The Golden Notebook describes a heterosexual social order where men displace children by demanding maternal attention from their female sexual partners and by paradoxically encouraging women's childlike dependency on men.

Maternal experience unmistakably informs Lessing's novel, and if the various "texts" which comprise The Golden Notebook are read as maternal discourses, Anna's writing from the perspective of the mother dialectically engages the various ideologies that inform her culture and construct her subjectivity. According to my reading, Lessing's novel represents a complex, multi-layered feminist discourse that acknowledges the material, social, and historical conditions which inevitably affect women's lives.

# I

## The Golden Notebook as Feminist-Postmodern Parody of Brechtian Stage Theory

In The Golden Notebook Anna Wulf often describes a process of emotional distancing in her writing so that she can more closely reflect on her personal relationships and her political engagement. Her emotional withdrawal to achieve a critical perspective is strikingly similar to the alienation effect ("A-effect") formulated by Bertolt Brecht in his theory of epic theatre, which he describes as "non-aristotelian [i.e.] (not dependent on empathy)."<sup>10</sup> Brechtian stage theory rejects empathy because it encourages a disabling passivity that impedes the critical faculties of the audience. To achieve this effect, actors "refrained

from going over wholly into their roles, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him" (71). In "A Short Organum for the Theatre" (1948), Brecht defines "a representation that alienates [as] one which allows us to recognize its subject but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (192).<sup>11</sup> The alienation technique allowed Brecht to scrutinize a familiar idea or social attitude by isolating it from its usual context and thereby emphasizing the previously unquestioned contradictions within conventional ideas, beliefs, or social practices.

Anna's theoretical ideas about the function of art and literature parallel aspects of Brecht's stage theory by challenging the primacy of private emotion and human feeling that might obstruct critical thinking about how society and politics impinge on the private or personal domain. Brecht's emphasis on the contradictions between actors and their characters or roles, or the disjunctions between the actors' emotions and their subject matter, becomes Brecht's primary technical focus in working toward the increased social consciousness of the spectator.<sup>12</sup> Relying on contemporary Brechtian-feminist theoretical paradigms which demonstrate how A-effects historicize women's experience as well as theorize a viewing position for the female spectator of drama, I argue that Anna's discursive process of emotional self-distancing shatters the concept of a coherent identity



as she represents herself in the various contexts of The Notebooks and in the "characters" of Anna in Free Women and Ella in Shadow of the Third, a narrative strategy which creates critical vantage points for feminist readings of The Golden Notebook.

Many scenes in The Golden Notebook acquire a pronounced theatrical effect, either through the narrator's use of dramaturgical metaphors to describe characters' interactions or through discursive shifts from prose to dramatic dialogues interspersed with stage directions. For example, in the highly stylized opening scene of Free Women, Molly and Anna are seated as if on stage, framed by a window as they banter with a strawberry vendor who speaks "off stage, as it were."<sup>13</sup> When Molly begins to argue with Richard after his arrival, he angrily responds: "There's no need to make bad theatre of it" (29). Later in the novel, Anna's description of the bitter relationships between couples at Nelson's party evolves from prose into a drama with speaking parts. In fact, many of the highly emotional and argumentative scenes in the novel are carefully manipulated through the use of dramaturgical metaphors. In another example, Anna's volatile interactions with Saul Green are described as role-playing:

I was playing roles, one after another, against Saul, who was playing roles. It was like being in a play, whose words kept changing, as if a playwright had written the same play again and again, but slightly different each time. (603-04)

Not only are many characters in the novel represented as acting, but Molly herself is a professional actress who serves as a model for Anna's "fictional" Julia, who is also an actress. This emphasis on actors, role-playing, and the contrived stage settings of the novel becomes a crucial part of the self-conscious and ironic repetition that thwarts the reader's engagement with The Golden Notebook as traditional realism.

The affinity between Lessing's novel and the conventions of drama, especially between Brechtian stage theory and the aesthetic tenets elaborated throughout Anna Wulf's writings, might be partially explained by Lessing's participation in the writing and production of post-war British drama. Lessing wrote two plays during this period, Each His Own Wilderness and Play With a Tiger, both produced at the Royal Court Theatre in 1958.<sup>14</sup> According to Michelene Wandor, both plays typified a new direction by women playwrights in post-war Britain who promoted women as central characters, especially Each His Own Wilderness in which the two primary characters are women whose social identities involve mothering.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, the two women in this play, like Molly and Anna in The Golden Notebook, share an intimate discussion about their relationships with men, their political affiliations, and the difficulties of being single mothers in a patriarchal society. While Lessing's decision to feature a dialogue between two single mothers in the

opening scene of her novel may not seem unconventional to contemporary readers, Wandor's assessment of Lessing's innovation in Each His Own Wilderness should directly affect our reception of The Golden Notebook, which appeared four years after this play:

It is extraordinary to have a scene where two older women have a heartfelt conversation, talking seriously about men, but also about their own lives. They are witty, independent older women for whom sexuality is as much a current reality as is motherhood. . . . Here are strong and articulate older women who feel that the world's concerns impinge on their personal lives, but who test the mother/son relationship by breaking with convention in order to achieve 'independence' (51).

In both of Lessing's plays, Wandor locates a "moment of suspension" between women's successful control over "their immediate material environment (their homes) and their ideas and work" and their need for relationships with men, which always represents "a potential threat" to women's sense of control (54). Therefore, women's physical and psychological management of "their own spaces" is counterpoised by the unresolved "personal/political conflicts" in their relationships with men (54). In The Golden Notebook, as well as in both of her plays, Lessing's decision to situate women within "their own spaces" can be traced to the influence of Brecht's epic theatre.

Prior to the production of Lessing's plays, Brecht's ideas on "epic" form in dramatic production had already gained notoriety in British theatrical circles.<sup>16</sup> Epic

theatre creates a political space for public consciousness by situating individual actors within the relevant historical, social, and material contexts of a particular setting (Wandor 91).<sup>17</sup> The foregrounding of the social context of characters often necessitated a deemphasis of empathic engagement between actors and the characters they portrayed, and consequently between actors and their audience. Empathic disengagement produced what Brecht terms "the relatively quiet style of acting which sometimes strikes visitors to the Berliner Ensemble" (Willet 235).<sup>18</sup> Instead of acting which "plays to the audience's hearts," Brecht insisted on sobriety of emotions in order to speak to the audience's intellect as opposed to their feelings, which he considered "private and limited" (15). In The Golden Notebook, Lessing does not insist on such a rigid dichotomy between emotion and intellect, but she nevertheless represents their tension through Anna, who struggles to position herself as a single woman and mother in relation to the various ideologies informing the historical context of her writing, such as British colonialism or the British Communist Party. The influence of the Berliner Ensemble's style of acting and Brecht's deemphasis of emotion become more apparent in Lessing's novel by understanding Brecht's ideas of epic theater, which he will later refer to as "dialectical theatre."<sup>19</sup>

Brechtian dialectic in the context of the theater takes into account "the general laws of motion and development applying to nature, human society and thought" (246). In "A Short Organum for the Theatre," Brecht calls attention to the practice within dialectical materialism of isolating and exposing social contradiction:

In order to unearth society's laws of motion this method treats social situations as processes, and traces out all their inconsistencies. It regards nothing as existing except insofar as it changes, in other words is in disharmony with itself. This also goes for those human feelings, opinions and attitudes through which at any time the form of men's [sic] life together finds its expression.  
(193)

Most important to Brecht is the exposure of the "disharmony" and "inconsistencies" within social relations which prevailing ideologies might disguise. In order to direct more attention to the inherent movement and potential for change within social processes, Brecht employed the technique of alienation which enables actors to place contradictory social phenomena in relief to that which is familiar. Specifically in regard to Brecht's theory, those social relations holding the greatest potential for change are those affecting social class, but as Elin Diamond as well as other feminist theorists of drama have commented, Brecht "exhibits a typical Marxian blindness toward gender relations."<sup>20</sup> The Brechtian aspects of The Golden Notebook such as Anna's discursive process of critical distancing allow for a Brechtian-feminist analysis in that class as well as gender

relations in the novel are examined from the perspectives of women.

Lessing represents the social and historical setting of The Golden Notebook by exposing its many "disharmonies" and "inconsistencies" as perceived by Molly and Anna throughout their dialogue in the opening scene of Free Women. For example, both women discuss the tensions between socialism and capitalism, as well as their feelings of conflict within the British Communist Party. Their political affiliations become a further source of conflict between them and Molly's ex-husband Richard, who vehemently defends the economic practices of capitalism. Richard, in turn, uses Anna's and Molly's politics as a means to attack their sexual and social independence and to question their status as both mothers and "free women." For example, Richard's animosity toward Molly's Communist affiliation becomes a means to criticize her status as a single woman: "His revulsion against left-wing politics, which was sudden, coincided with his decision that Molly was immoral, sloppy and bohemian" (16). In privately admitting her ambivalence about their social status as free women, Anna remarks to Molly that other people "still define us in terms of our relationships with men" (4). When Lessing claims that she wrote her novel "as if the attitudes that have been created by the Women's Liberation movements already existed," she confronts her readers with a fictional setting based on the kind of gender contradiction which Anna

detects in the prevailing social attitudes about "free women."

Wandor's analysis of the social readjustment of post-war Britain points to certain tensions in gender relations, especially regarding gender roles in the context of the prevailing ideology of the family. While men sought and resumed peacetime employment after World War II, a wide range of social policies and cultural forces "tried to return women to contented roles in the family after their involvement in the war economy" (3). Despite the fact that a high percentage of women remained in the post-war work force, government policy continued to place "a new emphasis on the family as the cornerstone of social reconstruction" (3).<sup>21</sup>

As the war economy forced gender roles to assume less rigid divisions and as the relaxing of public morality during the 1950s and 1960s encouraged sexual independence among women, the attempt to socially realign men's and women's public and private roles according to pre-war social conventions "produced an interesting tension and gender contradiction which had its effect on the way the next generation began to perceive the world" (Wandor 6). In the historical setting of The Golden Notebook, the different social identities ascribed to Anna Wulf produce this same tension and gender contradiction which Wandor examines in post-war drama. As a single woman who assumes the responsibility of motherhood outside the traditional support structure of the family, Anna

insists on maintaining her social identity through sexual, economic, and political independence. In constructing such a complex and socially contradictory identity for her female protagonist, Lessing typifies those dramatic innovations by women playwrights of the late 1950s wherein "female sexuality and motherhood are shown in symbiotic and problematic relationship" (Wandor 42).<sup>22</sup>

But gender contradiction represents only one of several dialectical tensions in The Golden Notebook between the private and the public, or the personal and political. The novel's dual narrative structure itself is dialectical, in that the omniscient voice of Free Women becomes internalized in the four notebooks as competing accounts of the same events. At the end of the novel, this tension between inside and outside perspectives is reproduced in the uneasy synthesis of the Golden Notebook, combining Anna's private record of the love affair between her and Saul Green with Saul's own verse and fiction which frame Anna's narrative.

The dialectical tension between the personal and the political is sustained throughout The Golden Notebook as Anna records the various emotions that affect her sexuality as a single woman, her maternal responsibility to her daughter, her artistic production as a writer, and her political activity in Great Britain's Communist Party. Through the self-reflexive analysis of her notebooks, Anna invokes a critical alter-ego who questions her emotional responses or



even her contrary lack of feeling. In the Blue Notebook, for example, when Anna records the personal experience of an "undirected apprehension," she subsequently analyzes this emotion as an "anxiety state" (554-5). Anna's critical distancing from her original experience of a vague "apprehension" increases as she asks Molly to read to her a medical "description of an anxiety state," under the pretext of verifying "a description in a novel" she had once read (555). Later when her feeling of anxiety returns, Anna observes her own responses to this sensation with emotional detachment: "It was as if a stranger, afflicted with symptoms I had never experienced, had taken possession of my body" (557). This scene, enacted between the emotionally sensate and the critically detached Anna, is typical of the dialectical movement The Golden Notebook, which alternates between the omniscient and detached narrative perspective of Free Women and the personal accounts of the Notebooks.

Anna represents her sequential analysis of her anxiety as an incremental process of emotional distancing which becomes a crucial discursive act in The Golden Notebook. Her insistence on examining the emotions is comparable to Brecht's placement of the emotions in the service of ideas. The epic theater's discouraging of empathy does not mean depriving the audience of all emotional involvement. In addressing the common misconception that the epic theater eschews all emotion, Brecht explains the necessity of

critically engaging the spectator's feelings: "[epic theatre] tries to examine them [emotions], and is not satisfied just to stimulate them. It is the orthodox theatre which sins by dividing reason and emotion, in that it virtually rules out the former" (162). According to Brecht, epic drama should be "neither moralizing nor sentimental," yet morals and sentimentality are placed "on view" (38). Therefore, when Brecht advocates the adoption of a critical approach to the emotions, he rejects popular if not banal notions that the emotions function independently of the historical and material conditions in which they occur:

The emotions have a quite definite class basis; the form they take at any time is historical, restricted and limited in specific ways. The emotions are in no sense universally human and timeless. (145)

Lessing parodically encodes Brecht's materialist view of the emotions when Molly praises Anna for writing "about what's real" rather than "little novels about the emotions" (42). In response, Anna cynically objects to Molly's "echo" of the British Communist Party's cultural hegemony which artificially separates the emotions from a reality defined only by "economics, or machine guns mowing people down who object to the new order" (42-3).<sup>23</sup> Anna reacts to Molly with a Brechtian understanding that material determinants construct the emotions and therefore do not exclude them from the "real":

"That remark you've just made is an echo from communist party criticism--at its worst moments,

moreover. God knows what that remark means, I don't. I never did. If marxism means anything, it means that a little novel about the emotions should reflect 'what's real' since the emotions are a function and product of society." (42)

Later, when Anna regains her emotional receptivity during the sessions with the analyst Mrs. Marks, she identifies her own hesitant emotional responsiveness within the historical context of a post-war society which she finds emotionally numbing. Her identification of a material basis for the emotions is a further parodic assimilation of Brecht's views:

But it isn't only the terror, and the fear of being conscious of it, that freezes people. It's more than that. People know they are in a society dead or dying. They are refusing emotion because at the end of every emotion are property, money, power. (my emphasis; 545)

Lessing's repetition of Brecht's ideas about the emotions is a manifestation of postmodern parody operative in The Golden Notebook. According to Linda Hutcheon, "parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies."<sup>24</sup> By installing or legitimating this one aspect of Brecht's theory, Lessing seemingly agrees with Brecht that the emotions do have a material foundation. Subsequently, Lessing's parodic subversion of Brecht's thought does not necessarily discard this view of the emotions; rather, she ironically invokes Brecht's distinction between empathy and the emotions to indict Mrs. Marks for her inability to empathize with Anna's emotional devastation. As she thinks back to her last visit

with Mrs. Marks, Anna feels the frustration of a child whose mother cannot comprehend her:

Mother Sugar--I remember saying to her in exasperation: "If I said to you that the H bomb has fallen and obliterated half of Europe, you'd click with your tongue, tck, tck, and then, if I was weeping and wailing, you'd invite me, with an admonitory frown or a gesture, to remember, or take into account some emotion I was wilfully excluding. What emotion? Why, joy, of course. Consider, my child, you'd say, or imply, the creative aspects of destruction!" (545)

Anna's self-representation as "weeping and wailing," her invocation of "Mother Sugar," and her imagined response of Mrs. Marks, "Consider, my child," becomes the narrative of a child in desperate need of maternal comfort. In the mother-daughter script which she writes for herself and her analyst, Anna rejects the Brechtian view of empathy by implying that Mrs. Marks's understanding and emotional identification would have done more to ease her fear than an "admonitory frown." Instead of critically examining the emotions as she does when reflecting on their function in art, Anna represents Mrs. Marks as avoiding painful emotional engagement with her client by suggesting to Anna that she is repressing joy. Anna finally condemns the professionalism of Mrs. Marks when she suggests that her analyst would recommend her thinking about "the creative aspects of destruction" instead of the devastation of the H bomb. Lessing's subversive twist of Brecht's theory--the necessity of empathy and the refusal of emotion--does not discard Brechtian aesthetics; instead,

Lessing ironically engages Brecht's ideas on the emotions to examine the destructive potential in human relationships.

After psychoanalysis, Anna painfully discovers that the recuperation of emotion is almost unbearable in a world on the brink of self-destruction; therefore, her solution is to regulate her feelings: "In a world as terrible as this, limit emotion. How odd I didn't see it before" (545). Knowing that "love, feeling, [and] tenderness" are deformed in the face of the world's terror, Anna determines that "it will be necessary to feel these emotions ambiguously" (545). Like Brecht's view of the inconsistency within human feeling, Anna decides that partial or contradictory emotions are preferable to her experience with Mrs. Marks: "Better anything than the shrewd, the calculated, the non-committal, the refusal of giving for fear of the consequences" (546). Anna's meditation on the emotions is interrupted when she writes, "I can hear Janet coming up the stairs" (546). The abrupt conclusion of Anna's discourse on the emotions provides a fitting contrast between her frustrated mother-daughter relationship with Mrs. Marks and her actual maternal attention to Janet.

Like Brecht, Lessing continually problematizes the role of the emotions in artistic production. In The Golden Notebook, Anna first isolates the emotions that impede intellectual engagement with the political issues which serve as a backdrop for her novel Frontiers of War. The principal

emotion she condemns in her writing is the "lying nostalgia" which promoted the "feverish illicit excitement of wartime" (63). Anna now describes the sentimental backdrop of wartime Rhodesia as an "unhealthy" emotion, and she brands her first novel as "immoral" since it encourages readers to empathize with the dissolution she feels the characters project. Convinced that her novel's romantic plot sensationalizes war and distracts attention from the social and economic issues that fuel hatred and racism, Anna rejects the element of nostalgia in her fiction as socially irresponsible and concludes: "This emotion is one of the strongest reasons why wars continue" (64).

Next, Anna attempts to rewrite the incidents that inspired her novel by representing them "more accurately" in the Black Notebook, without the distorting influence of emotion or "lying nostalgia." However, she confesses that in "trying to write the truth" in her notebooks, she realizes "it's not true" (274). Realizing that the act of writing, after all, is a reflective process that distances the writer and reader from the experience it attempts to represent, Anna observes: "Literature is analysis after the event" (228). Toward the end of The Golden Notebook, Anna experiences a gap between her thoughts and feelings which renders her own thoughts unfamiliar: "Nothing she thought pleased her; for some days she had been observing ideas and images pass through her mind, unconnected with any emotion, and did not

recognize them as her own" (507). And as a final revision in her Golden Notebook, she again rewrites the Mashopi incidents from the Black Notebook, but this time the critical Anna or "controlling personality" directs Anna to review the Rhodesian experience differently: "the terrible falsity of nostalgia had gone out of it; it was emotionless, and like a speeded-up film" (616).

Like Brecht's theory, Lessing's strategy disrupts the sense of immediacy or familiarity of events in order to present experience from a more critical vantage point.<sup>25</sup> Anna's search for "healthy art" with "genuine personal feeling" amidst the "dead literature" she reads for the Communist Party does not privilege the emotions but contextualizes their place in the writing of fiction. The self-criticism of her novel, aimed at uprooting its unhealthy sentiments which condone racism and war, is quite similar to Brecht's aim "to free socially-conditioned phenomenon from that stamp of familiarity which protects them from our grasp today" (192). Viewing Lessing's work through Brechtian filters diminishes the role of individual personality in the novel, and personal perspective and private emotions instead become vehicles to address social and political concerns that tie together the various personal narratives of The Golden Notebook.<sup>26</sup>

Both Brecht and Lessing examine the part which the emotions play in social conditioning, and both use the

emotions to defamiliarize what is conventional and to demonstrate that what often appears to be "natural" in human experience is usually culturally determined. But Lessing's narrative technique can also be viewed as a postmodern discursive strategy which Hutcheon would identify as a "critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past."<sup>27</sup> The similarities between Lessing's approach to the emotions and Brecht's treatment of the emotions in the "dialectical theatre" point to one exemplary characteristic of Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism as a form of self-conscious parody:

It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or "highlight," and to subvert, or "subvert," and the mode is therefore a "knowing" and ironic--or even "ironic"--one. Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale "nudging" commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of Lessing's critical treatment of the emotions in The Golden Notebook, her narrative strategy appears to endorse straightforwardly the general tenets of Brecht's stage theory. However, her "installing" and seeming "reinforcement" of Brechtian dramatic conventions undergoes a subtle feminist transformation. In the following complex and therefore extended example of Lessing's overt and deliberate reinforcement of both Brecht's art and technique,



I argue that Lessing subsequently appropriates Brecht's method of criticism of bourgeois culture to expose gender contradictions within the patriarchal organization of the local Communist sub-cell, whose activities comprise the Black Notebook. Following the lead of feminist drama theorists who see potential in the alienation technique for deconstructing and defamiliarizing gender representations, I demonstrate that Lessing engages in feminist-postmodern parody in the Black Notebook by employing A-effects to expose the hypocrisy of Willi's political views as well as his abusive sexual relations with Anna. This narrative technique also coincides with Hutcheon's views on how feminist authors may use postmodern parodic strategies in the interest of gender critique.<sup>29</sup>

In The Golden Notebook, Lessing reproduces a lyrical fragment from Brecht's The Threepenny Opera which appears noticeably separated from its prose context in the Black Notebook:

Oh the shark has  
Wicked teeth dear  
And he keeps them  
Shining white . . . (113)<sup>30</sup>

The tune of this song is hummed by Anna's intellectually pretentious and domineering companion, Willi Rodde, a homesick German exile and Communist sub-cell leader who is living in Rhodesia for the duration of World War II. As though Lessing wished to insure that her readers do not fail to make some enabling connection between this familiar tune

and the larger project of The Golden Notebook, she not only reproduces the song text (which is never sung by Willi) but also identifies its origin, naming both the play and its producer. Following the song text, Anna remarks that "Years later it was a popular song" and recalls "the sharp feeling of dislocation it gave me to hear the pop-song in London, after Willi's sad nostalgic humming of what he told us was 'A song we used to sing when I was a child--a man called Brecht, . . .'" (113). Anna's experience of estrangement, a "sharp feeling of dislocation" upon later hearing the popular version of the song, indicates precisely the kind of effect which Brecht intended the music of The Threepenny Opera to produce.

According to Brecht, The Threepenny Opera "showed a close relationship between the emotional life of the bourgeois and that of the criminal world" (Brecht on Theatre 85). In this bitter sample of German Expressionism, Brecht satirized what he considered to be corrupt bourgeois conventions, primarily through the use of pre-existing "banal song texts" set to contemporary music by Kurt Weill, who gave each score "the immediacy of a ballad" or a catchy cabaret tune (85). The chorus's nostalgic rendition of the songs popularized the superficial and often hypocritical sentiments of the lyrics' themes, such as "economic status should have no influence on a man's matrimonial decisions" or "the indestructible mutual attachment of a procurer and his girl"

(85). While it is probably safe to say that Brecht was little concerned with (if not blind to) the apparent gender bias in these particular lyrical themes, he nevertheless summarized the function of the play's music in terms of its exposure of bourgeois ideology:

In such ways the music, just because it took up a purely emotional attitude and spurned none of the stock narcotic attractions, became an active collaborator in the stripping bare of the middleclass corpus of ideas. It became, so to speak, a muck-raker, an informer, a nark. These songs found a very wide public. . . . A lot of people sang them to piano accompaniment or from the records, as they were used to doing with musical comedy hits. (his emphasis; 85-86)

Willi's "nostalgic humming" of the play's song becomes ironic in light of Brecht's parodic intention in producing The Threepenny Opera and serves to "inform" the reader about Willi's personality in much the same way that the middle-class popularization of the play's music served to expose bourgeois social values.<sup>31</sup>

While Brecht's own malicious sarcasm and his Marxist views of society are personal attributes which seem perfectly aligned with Willi's temperament and social attitudes in the Black Notebook, Anna also describes Willi's past according to the some of the same bourgeois conventions which Brecht satirized:

Willi had the most conventional upper-middle-class upbringing imaginable. Berlin in the late twenties and thirties; an atmosphere which he called decadent, but of which he had been very much a part; a little conventional homosexuality at the age of thirteen; being seduced by a maid when he was fourteen; then parties, fast cars,

cabaret singers; a sentimental attempt to reform a prostitute about which he was now sentimentally cynical; an aristocratic contempt for Hitler, and always plenty of money. (73)

Anna's identification of Willi with Brecht's song, which satirizes the pre-war German middle-class, calls the reader's attention back to this earlier description of Willi. The terms "conventional" and "sentimental" are repeated to emphasize the contrast between Willi's currently professed socialist commitment and his unquestioned past materialism which insulated him from the political events in pre-war Germany. Willi's sentimental or nostalgic humming of Brecht's song exposes Willi's character by placing his present political identity "on view," to use Brecht's phrase, in the context of his historical class affiliation and sympathies.

Lessing's parodic foregrounding of The Threepenny Opera reinforces Brecht's use of the play's music since the tune acts as "an informer" or "a nark" in exposing the contradictions of Willi's character. Willi's nostalgic humming is identical to the Brechtian performers' singing "not without nostalgia," and their dispositions on stage which "took up a purely emotional attitude and spurned none of the stock narcotic attractions" of bourgeois morality. Willi's emotional contradictions also recall Brecht's notion that "the coherence of character is in fact shown by the way in which its individual qualities contradict one another" (196). Seeing Willi as both the European bourgeois decadent

and the Marxist dialectician (71), Anna admits that contradictions in his emotional life are what define Willi more than any absolute statement about his personality. For every descriptive term Anna applies to Willi, its opposite is equally true: he is both "ruthless" and "kind," "cold" and "warm," "sentimental" and "realistic" (71). Despite the fact that Willi is described by Anna as the "emotional center" of the Communist sub-cell represented in the Black Notebook, he is nevertheless incapable of empathic response: "He had no sympathy for the emotionally weak or deprived or for the misfits. He despised people who allowed their lives to be disturbed by personal emotion" (73).<sup>32</sup>

Up to this point, Lessing's employment of a Brechtian technique is an example of postmodern parody in its reinforcement of Brecht's intent in producing The Threepenny Opera. Through the association of Willi with Brecht's play, Anna not only uncovers the contradictions of Willi's personality but exposes his hypocrisy as well. Brecht's definition of the "coherent" personality as "contradictory" is itself a logical contradiction, and the exposure of personal contradiction can be seen as part of a Brechtian microanalysis which subtends his larger program of exposing contradictory social relations through the medium of drama. In the Black Notebook, Anna reflects with amazement on the fact that despite the extremes of Willi's contradictory personality, the Communist sub-cell to which she belonged

remained loyal to Willi's leadership, even after detecting that he had lied about being "a member of the underground working against Hitler" (72). Although she and other members gradually discover that Willi's brilliant intellect can revert to "dogmatic," "heavy-minded," and illogical thinking, Anna confesses that "we continued to revolve around and depend on him. It is terrifying that this can be true" (72).

This same blind faith in Willi's political identity can be read as part of Anna's stubborn emotional loyalty to Willi as his sexual partner, despite their sexual incompatibility (70). The contradictory emotional relationship between Anna and Willi becomes Lessing's point of departure for using Brechtian theory in the service of a feminist-postmodern critique of patriarchal oppression in The Golden Notebook. Anna's reconstruction of her affair with Willi becomes her way of working through her contradictory emotional experience with her actual lover in Rhodesia, Max Wulf. She articulates this contradiction as having a child by a man she does not love (267). Anna's description of her relationship with Willi effects a critical distance from her account of her relationship with Max Wulf, with whom she conceives her daughter Janet: "Whenever I think about Max, I am overcome with helplessness. I remember the feeling of helplessness made me write about him before. Willi in the black notebook" (230).

Early in the Black Notebook, Anna describes her sexual incompatibility with Willi as an emotional impasse:

Willi and I understood this so well that our vanity wasn't involved. Our emotions were, about this point only. We had a kind of pity for each other; we were both afflicted permanently with a feeling of sad helplessness because we were unable to make each other happy in this way. But nothing stopped us from choosing other partners. We did not. (70)

The mutual humiliation that Willi and Anna feel, however, turns into a debasing form of self-punishment near the conclusion of the Black Notebook when Willi becomes suspicious of Anna's relationship with Paul, another member of the Communist sub-cell. When Anna replies that Willi seems attracted to Maryrose, another woman in their group, their argument ends in a hostile silence. At this point, Anna breaks into this historical narrative from her present perspective and reflects on her belief in women's sexual independence: "Challenged then, I replied 'Maryrose.' Challenged now, I would say that every woman believes in her heart that if her man does not satisfy her she has a right to go to another" (143). Anna's assertion of sexual autonomy stands in pointed contrast to her earlier self-diagnosis of "weakness" when she first describes her emotional dependency on Willi in the Black Notebook. The critical distance Anna establishes between the Black Notebook and her present perspective has a Brechtian effect in that she "alienates" or foregrounds not only Willi's exertion of dominance over her,

but she also authors a feminist revision of her sexual oppression by affirming her own right to sexual pleasure.

Anna's description of her final emotional confrontation with Willi fulfills the double agenda of postmodern parody by using Brechtian technique ironically to expose Willi's sexual abuse. Anna's account of the end of her affair with Willi is marked by the repetition of Willi's humming of Brecht's tune from The Threepenny Opera: "We didn't quarrel that night. After a moment, he began his lonely humming: Oh the shark has, wicked teeth dear . . . and he picked up his book and read and I went to sleep" (144). Willi's humming of the tune has become ominous in this context since he rapes Anna on the following day, after she returns from making love with Paul. When Willi asks Anna where she has been, he demands that she approach him:

I went over to him, and he gripped my wrist and brought me down beside him. I remember lying there and hating him and wondering why the only time I could remember him making love to me with any conviction was when he knew I had just made love to someone else.

That incident finished Willi and me. We never forgave each other for it. We never mentioned it again, but it was always there. And so a "sexless" relationship was ended finally, by sex. (151)

Here, Anna never directly accuses Willi of rape but instead describes his violation as though she were equally responsible: "We never forgave each other for it." However, she indirectly implicates him by exposing his sexual rapacity through Brecht's song, just as she earlier associates Willi



with Brecht's tune in order to question the legitimacy of his leadership of the Communist group in Mashopi. The song's ironic repetition in the context of Willi's rape is a parodic subversion of Brecht's primary intention for the music of The Threepenny Opera.

Lessing's exposure of gender inequity in the Communist sub-cell extends beyond the personal relationship between Anna and Willi. Despite the group's allegiance to socialist practice, their hierarchical structure is thoroughly patriarchal, reflected in their sexual practices which Anna describes as based on patterns of male dominance. Even though Anna's full intellectual participation in the Communist group is acknowledged, Willi is always seen as the leader and principal decision-maker. Maryrose's voice is never acknowledged during the theoretical discussions which Willi directs. Because of her physical beauty, Maryrose is also the focus of male sexual banter within the Communist group. Furthermore, her incestuous longing for her dead brother evokes the horror of heterosexual males in the group, especially Paul, who cannot accept Maryrose's unconventional and obsessive emotional attachment. The Black Notebook testifies to this contradiction between the Communist sub-cell's purported socialist practice and their gender oppression of Maryrose. For Anna, the Black Notebook begins a process of confronting the emotional contradictions in her relationship with Willi (and with Max), and through the

exposure of contradiction, Lessing bridges the artificial chasm between the affective and intellectual lives of her characters, a division many readers of The Golden Notebook term the private and the public, or the personal and the political.<sup>33</sup>

Lessing's use of Brecht's The Threepenny Opera in the Black Notebook marks her adaptation of Brecht's alienation technique for confronting issues of gender politics. As Janelle Reinelt observes, "Brechtian techniques offer a way to examine the material conditions of gender behavior and their interaction with other socio-political factors such as class."<sup>34</sup> Lessing's complicity with Brecht's aesthetic views and her subversive use of alienation strategies to effect gender critique demonstrates Lessing's cooperation with Hutcheon's postmodern-feminist agenda which uses parody to question patriarchal authority's universalizing pretense. Anna's ambiguity about placing full blame on Willi for his sexual abuse of her reveals women's double subjection during the early socialist movement, "not only to the ruling class, but also to the patriarchy" and that "even socialist practice still reveals structures of female oppression" (Reinelt 151). Therefore, Anna's political experience in the Black Notebook is difficult to distinguish from her sexual experience, but with the use of Brechtian epic techniques, however, Lessing alienates gender issues. According to Reinelt, alienation techniques "place the personal, individual experience of

characters within their socio-political context, widening the focus to include the community and its social, economic, and sexual relations" (158-59). The Black Notebook can be read as an interpolation between Anna's narrative present and her discourse with Mrs. Marks about her past with Max Wulf. As such, the Black Notebook participates in the Brechtian strategy of "creating a critical distance from the historical events which allows comparisons to contemporary time and ruptures the flow of the narrative, emphasizing the possibilities for intervention and change" (Reinelt 157).

Like Reinelt, Elin Diamond explores Brecht's dramaturgy for developing feminist theoretical possibilities.<sup>35</sup> Specifically, Diamond theorizes a feminist potential in the Brechtian Gestus: "a gesture, a word, an action, a tableau by which, separately or in series, the social attitudes encoded in the playtext become visible to the spectator" (89). According to Diamond, the gest is produced by "the explosive (and elusive) synthesis of alienation, historicization," as well as other combinations of Brechtian techniques. Diamond invokes Brecht's idea of the social gest as one "that allows conclusions to be drawn about social circumstances."<sup>36</sup> She provides Brecht's own favorite example of the social gest as dramatized by "Helene Weigel's snapping shut her leather money bag after each selling transaction in Mother Courage, thereby underscoring the contradictions between profiteering and survival--for Brecht the social reality of war" (89).

Part of the alienating and historicizing effect of the Brechtian gest is produced by the actor who creates "a spectatorial state that breaks the suturing of imaginary identifications and keeps the spectator independent" (Diamond 88). According to Diamond, this effect can only occur by separating the historical or actual subject from both her function as actor and the character she presumes to play: "This performer-subject neither disappears into a representation of the character nor into a representation of the actor; each remains processual, historical, incomplete" (88). Diamond summarizes the explicit Brechtian effect which these divisions produce: "the actor's body is subsumed in the dialectical narrative of social relations; the spectator's body is given over to rational inquiry" (88).

In postulating a gestic-feminist criticism, Diamond puts forth a Brechtian-feminist paradigm of the dialectical relations within the "triangular structure of actor/subject--character--spectator" which enable the alienating or foregrounding of "social attitudes about gender" (91). Specifically, the feminine gest would "highlight sex-gender configurations as they conceal or disrupt a coercive or patriarchal ideology" (91). My understanding of Lessing's adaptation of Brechtian theory in The Golden Notebook endorses Diamond's gestic-feminist criticism and transposes aspects of her dramaturgical application to the process of reading Lessing's text.

In my reading of The Golden Notebook, the Brechtian triangulation between actor, character, and spectator operates both from the reader's perspective and according to the internal dynamics of Lessing's narrative strategy whereby Anna herself occupies all three discursive positions. First, Lessing's dialectical narrative structure, consisting of a short conventional novel broken into segments by four sets of notebook entries, upsets the conventions of realist fiction by destroying the illusion of reality which traditional realism would effect. Lessing therefore discourages the possibility of the reader's empathic engagement with a given character through Anna's highly self-reflexive accounts which insistently retell and analyze the same events from different perspectives. The reader becomes engaged not through the imaginary identification with the character but by analyzing the various subject positions which Anna occupies in her different narratives. Second, Anna's position as narrator is irrevocably split between the various roles she plays through critical distancing and which she also witnesses as a detached spectator.

In regard to her maternal function, Anna often finds that her "role" as a mother is often one which she must self-consciously play. Lessing continually repeats this metaphor of role-playing, frequently in relation to Anna's maternal responsibility, through the narrative effect of critical distancing. The critical distance of a maternal perspective

operates according to Diamond's "feminist rereading of Gestus" which "signifies a moment of theoretical insight into sex-gender complexities, not only in the play's 'fable,' but in the culture which the play, at the moment of reception, is dialogically reflecting and shaping" (90). In the following related sequences from The Golden Notebook, the critical perspective of the mother invites a feminist-postmodern critique of gender relations which Lessing places "on view" through the ironic adaptation of Brechtian discursive strategies.

In the first example from the Blue Notebook dated "Jan. 19th, 1950," Anna is awakened by the cry of an infant in the adjacent apartment, reminding her of the hotel room next to theirs in Rhodesia "where the baby would wake us crying in the morning, then he would be fed and start gurgling and making happy noises while his parents made love" (233). This entry suppresses the fact that Anna is referring to the "unhappy" memory of her loveless affair with Max and what they heard the morning on which they conceived Janet. This incident is recorded in a previous entry dated "9th October, 1946":

Towards morning, the young married couple in the hotel room made love. . . . Listening to them made me unhappy; I have never been so unhappy. Max woke and said: "What's the matter?" I said: "You see, it's possible to be happy, and we should both hold on to that." (231)

When Max and Anna hear the couple's baby awaken, Max suggests: "Perhaps we should have a baby?" Anna responds

"irritably" but nevertheless agrees. She ends the 1946 entry with the ambivalent admission: "That was the morning Janet was conceived. . . . But this man never touched me at all, never got close to me. But there's Janet. I think I shall go to a psycho-analyst" (232).

In the later entry from January 19th, 1950, Anna compares her past hostility toward Max with her resentment of Michael, her present lover, who is cynical toward Anna's maternal role since her responsibility for Janet prevents him from seeing Anna when he wishes: "He said, ironically: 'Well, the cares of motherhood must ever come before lovers'" (233). The memory of Michael's sarcasm is followed by what Anna describes as a "feeling of unreality" which is meant to resonate with the previous memory of her daughter's conception. In the 1949 account, Anna cannot reconcile her complete lack of feeling for Max and what she terms the "fact" of Janet. In the later account when her daughter summons her to play, Anna goes through the motions of play but without feeling:

That's my child, my flesh and blood. But I couldn't feel it. She said again: "Play, mummy." I moved wooden bricks for a house, but like a machine. Making myself perform every movement. I could see myself sitting on the floor, the picture of a "young mother playing with her little girl." Like a film shot, or a photograph. (233-34)

In both notebook entries, Anna records a feeling of unreality or estrangement from her maternal identity, describing her maternal relationship to Janet as though it were a role she

is forced to play. In the first account, she distances herself from the woman who has just conceived Janet; in the subsequent entry, she feels unrelated to the "young mother" playing on the floor with her child.

In both scenes, which should be read intertextually, the two men, Max and Michael, are emotionally manipulative and eventually leave Anna. Toward the conclusion of the Rhodesian account, Anna states that she and Max married the week following Janet's conception, but that "a year later, we separated" (232). In the related account from 1950, Michael's cynicism is a prelude to his further emotional manipulation of Anna before he confesses that he is finally leaving her. Both accounts evoke the memory of couples who experience what Anna detects as "love" and "happiness," emotional pleasures which she feels deprived of in her sexual relationships. In the two notebook entries, the figure of the alienated mother serves a gestic function by foregrounding the tensions in Anna's sexual relationships and by placing sexual relations in obvious contradiction to Anna's maternal relations with Janet. This contradiction not only questions the authenticity of "love" and "happiness" as uncomplicated emotional pleasures in sexual relationships but also the gender politics that position maternal relationships and sexual relationships in hostile opposition.



## II

The Maternal as Social Gestus  
and the Metanarratives of The Golden Notebook

The diaries and fiction of Anna Wulf, written from her perspective as a mother, can be read as maternal discourses in which the personal and the political become inextricably meshed. Barbara Bellow Watson has argued that in Lessing's novel, "art is political, that psychology is political, and that sexual politics, marital politics, maternal politics, exhibit the same features as apartheid, the Rosenberg trial, party discipline, and bomb testing" (117).<sup>37</sup> For Watson, the power relations defining sexual, marital, and maternal issues, despite their seemingly "private" contexts, have the same political resonance as those historical themes which she cites from Lessing's novel.

Lessing calls attention to this synthesis of the personal and political near the conclusion of Free Women when Anna describes the dialectical tension between her social roles as a mother and as a writer, that is, between her personal responsibility for her daughter and her social responsibility to understand and "name" world events:

She knew that Janet's mother being sane and responsible was far more important than the necessity of understanding the world; and one thing depended on the other. The world would never get itself understood, be ordered by words, be "named," unless Janet's mother remained a woman who was able to be responsible. (651)

By referring to herself as "Janet's mother," Anna distances herself from her maternal role, following the Brechtian alienation strategy of "conscious rather than blind imitation" of her maternal responsibility.<sup>38</sup> This critical detachment, which is part of the novel's thematics of fragmentation and "breakdown," allows Anna to weigh her personal commitments against her social responsibility, and in doing this, she claims their interdependence by reaffirming her personal commitment to her daughter. Near the conclusion of The Golden Notebook, Anna's obsession with finding a "central point" among the political events from hundreds of newspaper fragments is contextualized by acknowledging the importance of her daughter in maintaining a balance between her competing responsibilities; therefore, Anna comments to her new boarder: "'Luckily I have a daughter coming home from school next month, by which time I'll be normal'" (656).

Anna can only "name" and understand the world to the extent that she detects her victimization as a woman and as a mother by the arbitrary social distinctions which relegate her maternal activities to the private sphere. On the other hand, Anna's maternal responsibility to her daughter does not become submerged by her political commitments outside the domestic sphere. In this regard, Molly Hite observes that Lessing's disavowal of the "sex war" as the primary focus of her novel "does not specify a kind of holism in which women's

issues are exposed as partial and minor by being subordinated to an overarching intellectual framework" (62).<sup>39</sup> Instead, Hite reads The Golden Notebook as problematizing any notion of "unity that results when the individual and the personal are subsumed under a governing premise" (62).

In this section, I argue that Anna's writing from a maternal perspective insistently challenges certain dominant ideologies or "governing premises" which comprise the historical and social contexts of The Golden Notebook. Those "governing premises," or what I refer to as metanarratives, which figure most prominently in the novel represent a range of economic, political, social, and psychological theories and practices, such as Marxism, capitalism, British colonialism, and Jungian psychology. Some readers oversimplify the novel's structure by situating these male-engineered theories and practices<sup>40</sup> within a strictly masculine context, thus dividing the world of The Golden Notebook into separate public and personal domains which arbitrarily represent masculine and feminine differences.<sup>41</sup> Instead, Lessing explores these various ideological systems from a maternal perspective in that mother-child relations become the means by which Anna's personal and political narratives are dialectically engaged.

The dialectical engagement of the mother and child with the seemingly contradictory contexts of different social and political systems upsets conventional expectations that would

traditionally delegitimize the mother as a public and political subject. Lessing's use of mother-child relations to reveal the contradictions and inconsistencies within different metanarratives in The Golden Notebook coincides with significant changes in women's roles in British drama during the mid-1950s to mid-1960s. As Michelene Wandor notes, "the figure of the mother assumes a complex significance"; furthermore, "the superficially 'private' nature of the domestic setting . . . is capable of incorporating large-scale political issues" (Looking Back 69). The use of mother-child relations, as well as other metaphorical references to birth and biological reproduction, in the seemingly alien contexts of public discourse and debate produces at least two immediate effects in Anna's writing. First, traditional mother-child relations are defamiliarized when set within the larger discursive contexts of metanarratives such as Marxism or Jungian psychology; second, this effect of defamiliarization reveals the partial views of metanarrative discourses by their exclusion of women's perspectives. Therefore, Anna's critique of various metanarratives from the viewpoint of mother-child relations represents what Molly Hite calls the novel's "treatment of the failure of a single world view to encompass the whole of twentieth-century reality" (63).<sup>42</sup>

In the uncovering of ideological contradiction or conflict, mother-child relations in The Golden Notebook

function like the Brechtian social gest. For Brecht, the gest does not indicate literal gesticulation but rather a social disposition: "it is not a matter of explanatory movements of the hands, but of overall attitudes" (Brecht on Theatre 104). In his specific applications of the term "gest" to music, drama, and language, Brecht described gestic language as communicating "particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men [sic]" (104). The gest becomes social when it "allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances" of a given situation (105). Anna's writing ultimately calls attention to the fact that social and political processes are not inevitable but historical; that is, according to Brecht's view, they are always capable of change.

### Communism as "World-Mind," "World Ethic"

In her Introduction to The Golden Notebook, Lessing suggests a relationship between her protagonist's Marxist perspective and the dialectical relation between wholeness and fragmentation in the novel:

This is because Marxism looks at things as a whole and in relation to each other--or tries to, but its limitations are not the point for the moment. A person who has been influenced by Marxism takes it for granted that an event in Siberia will affect one in Botswana. I think it is possible

that Marxism was the first attempt, for our time, outside the formal religions, at a world-mind, a world ethic. It went wrong, could not prevent itself from dividing and subdividing, like all the other religions, into smaller and smaller chapels, sects, and creeds. But it was an attempt. (xiv)

Anna conveys this same tone of critical appreciation for the Marxist contribution of social consciousness to the "cultural life" of a community. In the Black Notebook she writes, "People or groups of people who don't even know it have been inspired, or animated, or given a new push into life because of the communist party, and this is true of all countries where there has been even a tiny communist party" (66). Yet, the communist party's dialectical process of formation -- "a self-dividing principle" -- is paradoxically self-destructive in that it "flourishes by this process of discarding individuals or groups" according to the Party's own "inner dynamism" (67).

However, the dynamic relationship between wholeness and division which Lessing ascribes to Marxist philosophy in her Introduction is described differently in the Notebooks. Instead of comparing the operation of Marxist groups to religious sects, Lessing consistently compares the dialectical formation of the Communist Party to the processes of biological reproduction, therefore situating the activity of sexual reproduction within the political realm. Invoking a metaphor of birth in the Black Notebook, Anna describes the ongoing internal divisions and fragmentation of communist groups as contributing to their intellectual proliferation

and initiating "a process of self-destruction [that] began almost at birth" (68). Extending this metaphor, Anna sees the the formation of communist groups as directly contributing to cultural and social renewal by giving other groups "a new push into life" (66). Also, her descriptions of the local party's "self-dividing principle" of incorporating and shedding members is similar to embryonic division (67). Prior to Anna's experience of breakdown, she articulates her disillusionment with the Communist Party through another natal metaphor: "I feel the birth of a new sort of thought" (344). At the same time, however, Anna again notices that while the proliferation of the Communist Party is life-giving, it is also destructive, in that, "like any other institution, [it] continues to exist by a process of absorbing critics into itself. It either absorbs them or destroys them" (344).

Continuing this dialectical metaphor of birth and destruction in the Red Notebook, Anna discovers that she has become the necessary antithesis to local Party chairman Butte's viewpoints: "I realise that my role or function is to argue, to play the part of critic, so that Comrade Butte may have the illusion that he has fought his way through informed opposition. I am, in fact, his youthful self, sitting opposite him which he has to defeat" (347). Realizing that she is being emotionally manipulated as Butte's political alter-ego, Anna envisions herself as the youthful recreation

of Chairman Butte or like his combative son fighting paternal domination which she cannot overcome. The father-son relations which Anna uses to compare her working relationship in the Communist Party with Chairman Butte calls attention to the Party leadership's male hierarchy and patriarchal structure which excludes women's points of view or any suggestion of maternal relations within the Party.

Just as her recognition of fraud in the operation of the Party is felt as the "birth of a new sort of thought," she uses similar language to admit that her own volunteer work for the Party perpetuates this deception. Anna realizes that her reading and rejection of book manuscripts that recreate "the self-deceptive myths of the Communist Party" is a futile pastime (346), and her decision to leave the Party and reject "the illusion of doing something useful" is once again stated in terms of a birth: "It's a stage of my life finished. . . . I'm shedding a skin, or being born again" (353). Anna's metaphors of birth and division to describe Communist Party evolution and her private struggle with Party procedures yoke the personal to the political, destroying artificial distinctions that marginalize the mother in the private or domestic realm. Since the Communist Party politics Anna describes do not satisfactorily theorize women's social positions, Lessing's rhetoric suggests that Marxism offers a partial, not a world view.



Beyond the novel's rhetorical register, the maternal gest operates through women's perspectives of Communist Party activity. Anna and Molly are not only marginalized by their repudiation of marriage and their decision to remain single mothers, but they are also forced into a defensive posture by belonging to a radical political minority. In the novel's historical setting during the late 1950's, hostility to Communism is spreading in both the United States and Great Britain, forcing Molly and Anna to separate the politically and socially valuable ideals of the Communist Party from internal policies they find impossible to support. Frederick C. Stern argues that the end of The Golden Notebook represents Anna's and Molly's separation from leftist politics and "a diminution of the importance the women place on politics" (41).<sup>43</sup> But Stern ignores the profound ambivalence of Molly and Anna toward the Communist Party as they firmly endorse its social ideals but consistently reject its procedural intransigence. Lessing justifies their continuing dialogue on the various ideologies of capitalism, socialism, and colonialism by positioning Molly and Anna on the margins of the Communist Party.

Throughout the narrative, the political identities of Molly and Anna are inextricably woven into their social positions as single mothers; instead of diminishing the importance of leftist politics in the lives of both women, Lessing demonstrates how their maternal roles interface with

and redefine their politics which reflect their social and historical contexts. For example, Anna's most poignant gender critique of the Communist ethic occurs in her confrontation with mothers while doing volunteer work for the Party. When Anna canvasses London neighborhoods searching for Communist Party voters, she becomes more interested in the housewives and mothers she meets than in the election itself: "Five lonely women going mad quietly by themselves, in spite of husband and children or rather because of them. The quality they all had: self doubt. A guilt because they were not happy" (167). In a later entry in the Blue Notebook, Anna is similarly absorbed by a letter from a woman writer who is plagued with this same quality of guilt and self-doubt and who describes herself "as a mother first" (355). The woman reluctantly admits her doubt about "the glorious future of mankind" promised by the Communist Party and abjectly confesses her sense of inferiority over the fact that she has no formal education (356). The woman writer's acknowledgment of the social constraints of motherhood is registered as an apology, and her letter's closing in the generic masculine ("With fraternal greetings") ironically coincides with Anna's admission at the beginning of the novel that the political ideals of the Communist Party were never meant to address the oppression of women. Speaking on behalf of twentieth-century women, Anna reflects:

Why do our lot never admit failure? Never. It might be better for us if we did. And its not

only love and men. Why can't we say something like this--we are people, because of the accident of how we were situated in history, who were so powerfully part--but only in our imaginations, and that's the point--with the great dream, that now we have to admit that the great dream has faded and the truth is something else--that we'll never be any use. (53)

Anna attempts to resituate her political philosophy in regard to the Communist Party by examining her social position as a woman and mother. In describing the historical context in which the "great dream" of communism has failed to offer freedom and equality to women, she carefully avoids the self-incriminating tone of the mothers she encounters in her Party work.

However, Anna's awareness that she is not immune to the guilt that these mothers feel is evident at the end of the novel when she records a dream she has repeatedly experienced:

She had two children. One was Janet, plump and glossy with health. The other was Tommy, a small baby, and she was starving him. Her breasts were empty, because Janet had had all the milk in them; and so Tommy was thin and puny, dwindling before her eyes from starvation. He vanished altogether, in a tiny coil of pale bony staring flesh, before she woke, which she did in a fever of anxiety, self-division and guilt. (652)

Anna's dream is both personal and political since she recognizes the social contradiction between her privileged material condition and the privation of other mothers whose children will starve. Part of Anna's guilt also stems from her inability to cope with Tommy's attempted suicide and with the larger "awful necessity" to understand death and

destruction in the world (651). Anna relates this dream as she hovers on the edge of sanity in a frantic attempt to make sense of world events by clipping and piecing together fragments from newspapers: "It was as if she, Anna, were a central point of awareness, being attacked by a million uncoordinated facts, and the central point would disappear if she proved unable to weigh and balance the facts, take them all into account" (649). This fear of obliteration and the disabling guilt Anna feels for the "'starved' figure [who] might be anyone" imposes an impossible maternal responsibility on her as an individual, which she equates with madness.

From her perspective as a mother, however, Anna sees the delusion of attempting to separate the personal from the political, represented by her own healthy nursing child as opposed to the "half-glimpsed person" dying at her breast and "whose face haunted her" (652). In regard to her own child, Anna feels that "the world would never get itself understood, be ordered by words, be 'named' unless Janet's mother remained a woman who was able to be responsible" (651). For Anna, maternal guilt does not become counterproductive, but instead her dream calls attention to the "great dream" of social equality that has not yet been realized. Anna's maternal challenge to make sense of the millions of "uncoordinated facts" about the world and to nourish the starving figure subverts what Hite terms "the ideology of

coherence" of communism and its inability to provide a global perspective on social reality.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Polemic between Communism and Capitalism**

In The Golden Notebook, the polemical confrontation between the competing ideologies of communism and capitalism is dramatized in the context of an argument between Molly and her ex-husband Richard over their son Tommy's future. Richard, a corporate businessman, represents the bourgeois politics of capitalism, and Molly, with the support of Anna, articulates the Communist party ideals of socialism and world peace. In the first installment of Free Women, Richard argues with Molly about whether or not Tommy should accept a job in one of Richard's firms. Molly resists forcing a particular career on Tommy, but Richard wants his son to become allied to the world of business like himself. Richard defines the corporate world in terms of power: "'it's what runs this country'" (24). Lessing constructs their debate by dramatically opposing Molly's and Anna's wit and emotional detachment to Richard's anger and seriousness of purpose. For both women, Richard's emotional defense of business evokes pathos as well as mirth, but Richard feels seriously undermined by the two women whom he angrily denounces for influencing Tommy through their leftist politics.

The conflict between both parents over Tommy's future develops throughout the five sections of Free Women. As Hite and other readers have argued, The Golden Notebook foregrounds the repeated attempts of language to describe experience adequately, including the discursive aspects of political systems such as Marxism and capitalism which attempt to represent or totalize a world view.<sup>45</sup> More than a mere reflection of the political and historical background of The Golden Notebook, however, the polemic between capitalism and communism in Free Women represents the conflicting political discourses of two parents in competition for their son's allegiance. Tommy thus occupies a space of struggle between Molly and Richard who respectively stand for communist ideals and capitalist enterprise. Although Molly's influence over her son's thinking is more pervasive than Richard's, Tommy ultimately capitulates to his father and punishes his mother, who finally has become a scapegoat for Tommy's resentment at having to endure the painful dialectical tensions presented by his parents.

In the first section of Free Women, Tommy finds himself in the impossible position of being forced to negotiate between the social and political systems endorsed by each parent, leaving him with no viable middle ground. In fact, he first opts against his father's job offer and admits to Anna and Molly that "'I'd rather be a failure, like you, than

succeed and all that sort of thing'" (37). Tommy's use of the term "failure" implies an understanding of bourgeois ethics which equates Richard's material gain with success. Although he decidedly favors his mother's political sympathies over his father's, he unsparingly indicts both parents for what he sees as their hypocritical beliefs.

From Tommy's point of view, Richard's world of rapacious business dealings is repugnant, and he disarms Richard by accusing him of only liking "'people who have a lot of money'" (38). Because Tommy has grown up in the context of Molly's and Anna's socialist thinking, their maternal influence has taught him to detect the motives and inconsistencies behind the capitalist ideology. In the second section of Free Women, Tommy visits Anna's apartment to tell her why he rejected Richard's job offer:

"He said that one of the firms his firm controls is building a dam in Ghana. He said would I like to go out and take a job looking after the Africans--welfare work."

"You said no?"

"I said I didn't see the point--I mean, the point of them is being cheap labour for him. So even if I did make them a bit healthier and feed them better and that kind of thing, or even get schools for the children, it wouldn't be the point at all."  
(261)

After Tommy rejects his father's offer, Richard accuses his son of being influenced by Communist Party "megalomania." To illustrate his point, Richard relates an insidious anecdote to Tommy, suggesting that no Communist party member would agree to "'go to an undeveloped country and run a

country clinic for fifty people'" because communist logic would not condone "'improving the health of fifty people when the basic organization of society is unchanged'" (261). Richard's response to Tommy betrays his frustration with Molly's and Anna's political views, but at the same time, Tommy's decision reveals that both women's repudiation of conventional society leaves him no practical social option.

While Tommy correctly analyzes his father's job offer as social work masking corporate profiteering and third-world exploitation, he is quick to confront what he feels is inconsistent in the political commitment of his mother and Anna. Part of Tommy's disaffection with Molly's and Anna's politics stems from their increasing disillusionment with the Communist Party. Although he has been nurtured by both women's fierce idealism and enthusiasm over the promise of a radically new social order, Tommy's own insistent idealism is as delusional as the rigid political alliances from which Molly and Anna attempt to disengage.<sup>46</sup> Tommy has observed both women from the time which Anna cynically refers to as their "most primitive communist phase . . . when one thinks all one has to do is shoot the bastards," to their present, more detached political stance. Anna is horrified to hear Tommy repeating the same perverse witticisms she and Molly formerly exchanged about the workings of the Communist Party. When Tommy jokingly reassures his father that he would not organize a revolution to subvert Richard's business, he



states, "'Twenty years ago I would have. But not now. Because now we know what happens to revolutionary groups--we'd be murdering each other inside five years'" (263). Tommy reminds Anna that he gained this insight from a prior conversation between her and his mother years ago.

Because of his absolutism and demand for ideological purity, Tommy is impatient with his mother's ambivalent relationships with the contradictory systems of communism and capitalism. For example, Molly tries to hide her envy of Reggie Gates, the milkman's son who has definite career goals and a university scholarship. While she finds herself detesting these values as too bourgeois for her own son, Molly envies this working class youth for so earnestly desiring to advance himself socially. When Molly expresses her frustration with Tommy for rejecting Richard's job offer, Tommy quickly counters, "'You're being inconsistent, Mother'" (34). In the same section of Free Women, Molly overtly displays this inconsistency, despite her alleged sympathy with the working class, by haggling with the strawberry vendor over his prices that do not reflect his "low overhead" (12). This scene is strategically placed to contradict and problematize her mocking of Richard's business interests only moments later.

Tommy can identify with neither parent because his youthful idealism is intolerant of inconsistency. As an outsider in relation to the British Communist Party, he is

incapable of detecting the inconsistencies of the Party's politics which cause Anna and Molly to become cynical and skeptical. Tommy confesses to Anna, an alternate mother figure, his feeling of estrangement from her and his mother: "'When I see my father and mother together, I don't recognize them, they're so stupid. And you too, when you're with Richard'" (261). Tommy's inability to empathize with either of his parents or with Anna demonstrates one of Lessing's Brechtian strategies of alienation which foregrounds the dialectical tension between communism and capitalism and invites critical reflection on both systems. Therefore, Tommy points to the contradictions he detects within Anna's political commitment and condemns her as dishonest for not assuming social responsibility as a writer:

"That's what I feel too--people aren't taking responsibility for each other. You said the socialists had ceased to be a moral force, for the time, at least, because they wouldn't take moral responsibility. . . . But you write and write in notebooks, saying what you think about life, but you lock them up, and that's not being responsible." (40)

Tommy sees how easily he could become a tycoon like Richard, but he is certain that working for his father would exacerbate his painful dialectical tension, resulting in "a divided mind" (264). Knowing that he must renounce the fraudulence of the capitalist endeavor, Tommy feels equally compelled to reject the inconsistency of Molly and Anna who are compelled to register their dissent with the Communist Party only in a private forum. For Tommy, his family mirrors

the hypocrisy he detects within two systems whose members refuse to assume responsibility for each other.

Throughout the novel, the family becomes a political arena for ideological conflict, underscoring Lessing's merging of the private and political spheres. For example, members of the local chapter of the British Communist Party are often compared to a biological family in their political affiliation. As such, they are constrained by their party loyalty not to voice dissent in the presence of other party members. The myth of Stalin as a larger-than-life "father figure" is interrogated and parodied in Anna's notebooks, but the most scrupulous party members fear to criticize Stalin, even to members considered as the inner "family" of the party.<sup>47</sup> In a further critique of capitalism, the joyless interactions between members of Tommy's biological family are described according to the most banal commercial metaphors, Lessing's double indictment of the capitalist system and the conventional values of the nuclear family. For example, Molly is described as "the product" of a disastrous marriage; she marries Richard out of a need for "security and even respectability"; Tommy becomes "a product of this marriage"; Richard is "the very solid businessman he had since proved himself"; and the incompatibility between Richard and Molly leads to "the business of divorce" (my emphases; 7).

Tommy's rejection of capitalism is an easier intellectual task than his struggle over working-class

politics and fidelity to the political ideals of socialism. Despite Richard's material wealth and power, Tommy takes his moral and intellectual cues from Molly and Anna. Richard responds to his son's initial rejection by cynically denouncing the politics of Molly and Anna and by implying that his paternal authority has been replaced: "'but what price your precious values--Tommy's been brought up on the beauty and freedom of the glorious Soviet fatherland'" (21). But in repudiating his father, Tommy endorses neither Stalin nor Marx as paternal leaders; instead, he largely transfers the blame for the soured ideals of the communist party to his mother and Anna. Tommy's attraction to socialism is riddled with self-doubt as he precociously detects limitations of the socialist movement through the politically-wizened perspectives of Anna and Molly.

Tommy is unable to break free of the ideological stranglehold posed by his parents. His self-diagnosis of a "paralysis of the will" prevents him from choosing a career or leaving his mother's house to venture into the world on his own (262).<sup>48</sup> In what Elizabeth Abel diagnoses as a characteristically Freudian resolution, Tommy blinds himself in a suicide attempt and wins "a literal replacement" for his mother, Richard's second wife Marion.<sup>49</sup> What Abel ignores, however, is the fact that Tommy's self-punishment does not result in a final separation from his mother but rather in

her imprisonment by him. Anna explains the incestuous arrangement to Richard:

"Tommy's set everything up so that he has his mother in the house, not next to him, but close. As his prisoner. And he's not likely to give that up. He might consider, as a great favour, going away for a holiday with Marion, provided Molly tagged along well under control." (385)

Tommy's domination of both maternal figures is ironic in that Molly, who originally boasted of being a "free woman" like Anna, is now a prisoner of her own son. Marion, who has been freed "from her position as prisoner, or fellow victim" as Richard's wife and mother of three children, has substituted one relationship of dependency for another (384).

Furthermore, Anna is also imprisoned by Tommy since she never recovers from her sense of guilt over her suspicion that she may have been partly responsible for Tommy's suicide attempt. Tommy's confinement of Molly, Anna, and Marion can be seen as a maternal gest since Lessing represents the mothers' punishment as a result of their refusal to conform absolutely to one system.<sup>50</sup> Neither capitalism nor communism offer politically viable affiliations for women in The Golden Notebook. Furthermore, if Tommy's intolerance of inconsistency and Richard's refusal to confront inconsistency represent masculine thinking, then Molly's and Anna's doubt and skepticism cannot be represented by this logic.

The imprisonment of the three mothers marks another impasse in the narrative resulting from Tommy's confrontation with two ideologies whose inconsistencies he cannot

negotiate. Richard's dualistic thinking ignores such inconsistency, but Molly and Anna, who have tried to teach Tommy to live with contradiction, continually readjust their political views throughout the novel. Anna poignantly comments to Richard about Tommy's domination of Molly: "'There are people who need victims, dear Richard. Surely you understand that? After all, he is your son'" (385). Tommy subjugates his mother whom he keeps "not next to him, but close" enough for her to feel her punishment through his dominance. The victimization of the mother foreshadows the end of the novel where Tommy capitulates to his father by endorsing a supposedly "new breed" of capitalist, the "progressive businessman," who intends to change the world. Tommy's ultimate decision is thus a failed attempt to occupy a middle ground between the politics of both parents.<sup>51</sup>

### **Colonialism as Patriarchal World View**

The story of Tommy's development is only one instance whereby Lessing explores power relations in The Golden Notebook by strategically locating the mother and child as a site of political conflict in the narrative. In the Black

Notebook, Anna relates George Hounsflow's personal crisis of fathering a biracial child, which provokes a debate among members of the small leftist group who spend their weekends at the English Mashopi hotel. The birth of George's biracial child becomes an occasion for exposing the rupture between theory and praxis among the Communist Party members, leading them to confront their own elitism and racism as they live as beneficiaries of a colonialist government. The secret sexual liaison which the group discusses occurs between George and the servant Marie, who is married to Jackson, the Boothbys' cook at the Mashopi hotel.

The interracial love affair between George and Marie is the source for Anna's novel Frontiers of War about two lovers in an African setting who are separated by the social and legal policies of apartheid. In a scene from the Black Notebook when Anna and her group visit Mashopi for a weekend, George confides to Anna and Willi that one of Marie's children is his son. George's subsequent guilt over the prospect of the boy's bleak future leads him to argue with Willi:

"But Willi--you stupid clod, there's my child, I'm responsible for it living in that slum back there.

"Well?" said Willi again.

"I'm a socialist," said George. "And as far as it's possible in this hellhole I try to be a socialist and fight the colour bar. Well? I stand on platforms and make speeches. . . . And now I propose to behave just like every other stinking white sot who sleeps with a black woman and adds another half-caste to the Colony's quota." (127-28)

The desperate paternal responsibility George suddenly feels becomes ironic, considering his lack of concern for the material welfare of Marie, Jackson, or the other siblings of his illegitimate son. In the context of his socialist political beliefs, George's overwhelming sentiment for this one child, in comparison to his detachment from Marie's entire family, is misplaced. Although he vehemently denies an inordinate concern for his son, George admits with embarrassment that "there might be another little Hounslow in the Boothby kitchen any day" (130). George's use of the patronymic to inscribe this child as his own (and any future children he and Marie might conceive) is meant to clash against the racially segregated colonial setting in which the love affair occurs. The ultimate effect, however, is a more disturbing form of imperialism on George's part, particularly in his assumption that taking the child from Marie is his unquestionable option. George's presumption negates Marie, who seems untroubled over the question of the child's paternity: "He had asked the woman, and she had said yes, she believed it was his child. She was not making an issue of it" (127).

More accurately, Marie never voices her opinion about the child throughout the text; her viewpoint is only reported by George. The mother's voicelessness calls attention to the double constraint of race and gender which victimize Marie under a colonial system. Within a patriarchal system whereby



men appropriate children under their own name, women are given less authority over their children. And under the colonial regime of the story's setting, neither Marie nor Jackson would be entitled to demand anything of George for the child's support, and the various solutions George suggests to provide for the boy are both romantic and impractical. Later when he is drinking, George pathetically mocks his own futile desire to acknowledge his son socially. Anna records his sardonic humor in a bitter racist parody between father and son:

I remember that one evening George made us laugh until we were helpless with a fantasy about how one day his son would come to his house demanding work as a houseboy. He, George, would not recognize him, but some mystical link, etc., would draw him to the poor child. He would be given work in the kitchen and his sensitivity of nature and innate intelligence, "all inherited from me of course," would soon endear him to the whole household. In no time he would be picking up the cards the four old people dropped at the card-table and providing a tender undemanding friendship for the three children--"his half-siblings." For instance he would prove invaluable as a ball-boy when they played tennis. At last his patient servitude would be rewarded. Light would flash on George suddenly, one day, at the moment when the boy was handing him his shoes, "very well-polished, of course." "Baas, is there anything more I can do?" "My son!" "Father. At last!" And so on and so on. (139)

George's drunken self-pity reveals a continued obsession with his illegitimate son, and his intended derision of biological affinity between himself and the child, in the phrase "some mystical link," fails to effect social criticism and degenerates into bathos. The parodic scenario Anna describes

is also revealing for what it omits, since George fails to mention Marie, whom he professes to love, and neglects the fact of the added social burden which an interracial son might entail for her.

Marie is a shadowy figure, remaining voiceless and unseen throughout the entire Mashopi episode. Anna only glimpses a silhouette of her one evening as she moves silently through the darkness to meet George outside the hotel. Only George refers to Marie by name; otherwise, she is regarded in the narrative as "Jackson's wife," or "the Boothby's cook's wife." When George confesses that Marie has become his mistress, Willi cynically replies, "'If you can use such a word'" (127). George insists, however, "without any consciousness of humour" that Marie "'is entitled to the proper word, as a measure of respect, so to speak'" (127). In an effort to dignify Marie by defining her in terms of her sexual subjugation, George unconsciously registers his political naïveté since the silent, shadowy figures of both the mother and child have no legal claim to social autonomy. Furthermore, neither George nor Willi are cognizant of the extent to which racial subjugation compounds Marie's vulnerability to sexual oppression, and her presence in the narrative remains a mere backdrop for George's narcissistic obsession with his biological offspring.

Marie and her child stand at a juncture in the Mashopi diary where the political beliefs of individual party members

diverge from their social practice. The interaction between George and Willi demonstrates this division between theory and praxis when George suggests taking the child to live with his wife and family:

"What is the point?" said Willi. "Your blood? Your sacred sperm, or what?"

Both George and I were shocked. Willi saw it with a tightening of his face, and it remained angry as George said: "No, it's the responsibility. It's the gap between what I believe in and what I do." (130)

Aware that he cannot fully live up to the ideals that he endorses as a socialist, George acknowledges the gap between his beliefs and actions, but his sense of responsibility extends only as far as his biological relations. Willi's suggestion that there is no practical solution to George's dilemma, short of ruining the lives of his entire family, is not far removed from Richard's joke in Free Women that Communist Party members will work for total social change while ignoring any given individual's welfare.

Regardless of George's misplaced sentiments, Willi's inappropriate counsel of emotional detachment offers no comfort but instead calls attention to the pervasive sense of despair that Communist Party members express throughout the narrative. Willi's insistence on separating the personal from the political results in a philosophy that regards proximate social ills as a distraction from the loftier goal of creating a just world. Anna notices this same division

within herself when she is stunned by her racist reaction to George's affair with Marie:

Last night I had been wishing I was her, but it was an impersonal emotion. Now I knew who it was, and I was astounded to find I was hating George and condemning him. . . . And then, and this was worse, I was surprised to find that I resented the fact that the woman was black. I had imagined myself free of any such emotion, but it seemed I was not, and I was ashamed and angry -- with myself, and with George. (128)

The idea of a sexual relationship with George intrigues Anna until she discovers that his present lover is a black servant. The passage indicates that her abhorrence of "the colour bar" is only an abstract idea until the issues of race and class confront her personally. Anna's political naïveté is exposed, revealing her previous self-assessment as confidently above the resentment she now feels.

Marie and her child also effectively represent the ideological conflict between communism and colonialism in the novel. When Jackson is finally fired by Mrs. Boothby, no member of Anna's group protests on his behalf. When Anna laments that Jackson will be forced to send Marie and the children to Nyasaland, another part of the British Protectorate, Willi merely responds, "'It's the best thing that can have happened. Jackson and family will leave and George will come to his senses. . . . Jackson's been lucky enough to have his family. Most of them can't. And now he'll be like the others'" (148). Not only does the communist group remain impotent over Jackson's firing, but

they are apathetic as well.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Paul's hypocrisy is especially underscored since he befriends Jackson in the name of "brotherhood," solely to incite Mrs. Boothby's rage. During one of their first visits to Mashopi, Paul, Willi, and the others in the group find amusement in parodying the provincial colonial mentality, encouraging Mrs. Boothby confidently to voice her racist beliefs. The group members' amusement at the Boothbys' expense suggests that they feel untainted by the oppressive colonial mindset which they criticize when, in fact, all the material comforts and privileges of the Mashopi establishment reinforce the group's own provincialism:

"We made jokes about the Mashopi hotel and its sinister relaxing influence. We used it as a symbol for every sort of luxury, decadence and weak-mindedness. Our friends who had not been there, but who knew it was an ordinary road-side hotel, said we were mad." (95)

Lessing therefore problematizes the existence in Mashopi of the informal communist group which Anna aptly describes as "more a kind of emotional entity" than a genuinely effective political organization. Their hypocrisy of planning a revolution in theory without established connections to any Rhodesian Nationalist or workers' movement only emphasizes their intellectual isolation and political naïveté. Each member of the group is capable of intellectualizing the plight of native Africans in the most sophisticated terms, but at the same time, they are responsible for the circumstances leading to the further displacement of Jackson

and Marie. The group effectively insulates itself from the immediacy of racial and political conflict which finally results in the exile of Marie and her children to Nyasaland as victims of the double oppression of socialist self-righteousness and colonial domination. Although both mother and child are silenced in the narrative, their victimization becomes a complex discourse that evolves from Frontiers of War to the Black Notebook and finally to the Golden Notebook.

The nostalgic quality that Anna now detects in her previously published novel Frontiers of War but repudiates is precisely the romantic and superficial self-interest represented by George, Willi, Paul, as well as her own persona in the Mashopi scenes of the Black Notebook. Anna writes about Frontiers of War: "But the emotion it came out of was something frightening, . . . a longing for licence, for freedom, for the jungle, for formlessness" (63). Anna admits there is nothing untrue in her novel, but its "false" quality is a result of her sensationalizing the political and racial climate of the Rhodesian colony by recreating the relationship between George and Marie as a commodity, a temptation she now resists by rejecting lucrative film offers for her story. Anna recognizes that the sense of longing "for licence, for freedom, for the jungle, for formlessness" which she feels her novel evokes is a result of her colonial mindset which imputes an "otherness" to indigenous Rhodesians represented in her biracial plot. Her novel offers no insight

into the political circumstances behind colonial domination or the immediacy of its victims' suffering.

Marie and her child are denied subjectivity by George's obsession with his biological son, but in occasioning the discourse that questions the political and economic systems that shape their lives, the disfranchised mother and her child become the nexus between the personal and political. In establishing Marie and her child at the center of political debate, Lessing creates a maternal gestus which reveals that no political discourse is above interrogation by any member of society, especially the mother who has traditionally been relegated to the private sphere. Also, Lessing is perhaps less interested in critiquing political systems in themselves than in blurring the artificial distinctions between the personal and the political that would maintain the interests of the mother as private and inconsequential.

### **Jungian Archetypal Experience as Metanarrative**

Just as Lessing strategically situates the figure of the mother to interrogate the politics of communism, capitalism, and colonialism in Anna's writing, she accordingly situates the psychoanalyst Mrs. Marks, whom Molly and Anna privately

refer to as "Mother Sugar" and "the maternal witch," to effect Anna's dialectical engagement with Jungian psychology and to question Jungian notions of identity and the "integrated" self. Through Mrs. Marks, Anna confronts her personal fears and political crises through the process of "therapeutic universalization" offered by her Jungian analyst.<sup>53</sup> Anna's encounter with a maternal figure of the analyst parallels the discomfiting processes Tommy and Janet must go through in negotiating their own political and social spaces apart from their mothers.

According to Lorelei Cederstrom, a Jungian psychoanalytical approach attempts to mediate the process of individuation, whereby a person assimilates her contradictory experiences and develops "a unified psyche through the creation of a link between one's conscious life--the world of the ego and the persona--and the darker shadows of the unconscious."<sup>54</sup> This integration of the conscious and the unconscious mind results in the Jungian archetypal self. According to Cederstrom, Anna must confront several archetypal figures which emerge separately under the organizing principals of the shadow and the animus (51). Anna's confrontation with her shadow occurs in the fictional creation of Ella, her alter-ego and heroine of Anna's novel Shadow of the Third. The animus, represented in the creative or destructive potential of the dwarf who symbolizes Anna's deepest fears, recurs as one of several mutant forms: a



bulbous Russian vase, a malicious elf, an old man or woman (55). Anna's ability to confront and name each archetype marks her growth toward a unified self in that her own creative power and potential for self-destruction, represented by the different archetypes, become subject to self-control. Cederstrom argues that Anna's complete psychological integration enables her to establish internal order and control over both the "disorder of the world" as well as "her own anarchic impulses" (56).

Through its endorsement of generalizing archetypal principals, the Jungian psychoanalytical approach attempts to relate the experience of the individual to the entirety of human culture, as though human culture itself were a monolithic concept. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious draws upon the supposedly universal, transcultural, and "timeless" elements of human experience. As such, Jung's psychoanalytical theory deemphasizes the cultural and historical specificity of individual experience, a specificity which Anna later insists upon as she grows toward independence and consequently away from the maternal influence of Mrs. Marks. In contrast to Cederstrom's reading of The Golden Notebook which neatly plots Anna's journey toward an integrated self and argues for her final capitulation to Mrs. Marks's philosophical advice, I read Anna's relationship with her analyst as one of dialectical tension between the primacy of women's individual experience

in a precise historical context as opposed to the narcotic attraction of Jungian philosophy which attempts to smooth over Anna's experience of contradiction and feeling of helplessness through its generic and mythic effects of archetypal categorization.

The figure of the mother, operative here as the maternal analyst, functions like the Brechtian gest to contrast Anna's social and personal experience against those interpretive gestures which would gloss over the ideological factors which shape her historical experience as a woman. Anna establishes a critical distance between Free Women and the Blue Notebook where she records her past relationship with her analyst, and she refers to Mrs. Marks as a maternal figure in the present context of Free Women in order to interrogate her past experience with Jungian psychoanalysis. Anna's ambivalent relationship with Mrs. Marks is alluded to in the first section of Free Women as the name "Mother Sugar" surfaces in a conversation between Molly and Anna about their past relationships with the analyst:

The reservations both had felt about the solemn and painful ritual were expressed by the pet name, "Mother Sugar"; which, as time passed, became a name for much more than a person, and indicated a whole way of looking at life--traditional, rooted, conservative, in spite of its scandalous familiarity with everything amoral. In spite of-- that was how Anna and Molly, discussing the ritual, had felt it; recently Anna had been feeling more and more it was because of; and this was one of the things she was looking forward to discussing with her friend. (5)

Anna now equates the name "Mother Sugar" not exclusively with the person of Mrs. Marks but with her brand of psychotherapy, "a whole way of looking at life" or a "Weltanschauung" which Anna still feels reluctant to endorse. By associating the maternal analyst with what is "traditional, rooted, [and] conservative," Anna equates the name "Mother Sugar" with those conventional values which produce the palliative effect of a "sugar pill," or more suggestively of maternal relations, a "sugar tit."

Although Anna's adult crisis of social responsibility continues to challenge her with such agonizing questions about nuclear proliferation, world war, and global famine, she recounts the "solemn and painful ritual" of Jungian analysis which has largely attempted to internalize and thereby reduce the social contradictions which Anna finds unbearable. In the passage above, Anna establishes a subtle difference between the phrases "in spite of" and "because of," suggesting that Mrs. Marks's endorsement of conventional values in reaction to the amoral is hypocritical, in that the analyst offers only a self-conserving response to or retrenchment from the social contradictions which Jungian analysis cannot resolve.

Anna initially seeks Mrs. Marks's help to confront a "lack of feeling" she detects in herself, explaining that "I've had experiences that should have touched me and they haven't" (232). Some of the experiences Anna refers to

involve conflicts concerning maternal relationships. For example, Anna begins her Blue Notebook by recording a dispute between Molly and Tommy: "Tommy appeared to be accusing his mother" (228). Anna is disturbed as she finds herself converting the argument between Molly and Tommy into a fictional account, which emotionally distances herself from the pain of such experience:

Why do I never write down, simply, what happens? Why don't I keep a diary? Obviously, my changing everything into fiction is simply a means of concealing something from myself. Today it was so clear: sitting listening to Molly and Tommy at war, very disturbed by it; then coming straight upstairs and beginning to write a story without even planning to do it. I shall keep a diary.  
(229)

Mrs. Marks diagnoses Anna's lack of feeling as writer's block, which Anna vehemently denies (234). Feeling as though her analyst behaves like an uncaring mother, Anna resents Mrs. Marks's complacency about her anguish over writing Frontiers of War, evident in her sarcastic miming of Mrs. Marks who believes that "that sacred animal the artist justifies everything" (62). Anna sees Mrs. Marks as an "enemy" (like the film producers seeking the rights to Anna's novel) who uses "the poison of the word 'artist'. . . to justify himself by destroying the real thing" (62).

Toward the end of the novel as Anna slowly regains her ability to feel, she articulates in Jungian terms what her experience in psychoanalysis has accomplished:

"You talk about individuation. So far what it has meant to me is this: that the individual

recognizes one part after another of his earlier life as an aspect of the general human experience. When he can say: What I did then, what I felt then, is only the reflection of that great archetypal dream, or epic story, or stage in history, then he is free, because he has separated himself from the experience, or fitted it like a piece of mosaic into a very old pattern, and by the act of setting it into place, is free of the individual pain of it." (471)

But the Jungian process of individuation is in some ways another form of evasion to Anna, who detects a dishonesty in Mrs. Marks's therapy which only teaches her to avoid emotional pain by containing it in the archetypal dream, story, or past. Here, she accusingly confronts her analyst:

"But now I can feel. I'm open to everything. But no sooner do you accomplish that, than you say quickly--put it away, put the pain away where it can't hurt you, turn it into a story or into a history." (471)

At this point, Anna sees Mrs. Marks as a bad mother for refusing to help her cope with her pain, therefore fostering her dependency. According to the Blue Notebook, Mrs. Marks considers Anna's art only as a vehicle for containing her fear and pain.

Finally, Anna announces to Mrs. Marks that she is now ready to forsake the Jungian world of archetypal images, to "'leave the safety of myth'" and live "'the kind of experience women haven't had before'" (471). Anna leaves her maternal analyst like a child who loses interest in old toys: "'I'm tired of the wolves and the castles and the forests and the priests'" (471). In fact, she describes the Jungian approach as being "'forced back into infantilism and then

rescued from it by crystallising what one learns into a sort of intellectual primitivism'" (468). Anna feels confined by the idea of psychological growth as marked stages whereby one's "'childish memories" merge "with the art or ideas that belong to the childhood of a people'" (469). Because Mrs. Marks cannot understand Anna's experience "in modern terms" but only according to those myths "'that belong to the savage and undeveloped stages of society,'" Anna identifies Mrs. Marks with the "world of the primitive" (469). For Anna, her Jungian analyst's deadly aestheticizing of experience is symbolized by the cultural artifacts or "dead art" on display in Mrs. Marks' office. Anna rejects the cultural reification of the gallery-like office and, in contrast, reaffirms "that raw unfinished quality in my life [which] was precisely what was valuable in it" (237).

Anna's departure from Mrs. Marks is analogous to a child's development beyond the mother's purview into uncharted territory. Anna's interaction with Mrs. Marks fits into a larger social dynamic in The Golden Notebook whereby the relationship between developing children and their mothers is often one of dialectical tension. For example, Tommy earlier complained to Anna that mothers err in describing their children's growth in phases, but Anna objects that it is only "natural" that mothers view children in a series of phases or in various phases "all at the same time" (269). When Tommy counters that children are seen not

as individuals but as temporary shapes of something," Anna asserts that women see their own children in terms of a "continuous creative stream." However, Janet's decision to go to boarding school evokes the same surprise from Anna that Mrs. Marks feels when Anna announces her decision to separate in herself "'what is old and cyclic, the recurring history, the myth, from what is new'" (472-3).

Despite Mrs. Mark's suspicion of the claim that Anna's life might be entirely different from those experiences comprising past lives, Anna insists that her experience as a woman is unique to her historical time, and she accuses Mrs. Marks of acting as though "'further development of the human race'" were no longer possible (473). Similarly, Anna tells Saul Green emphatically: "'I am the position of women in our time'" (579). In the following denunciation of archetypal experience, Anna compares her present experience to the lives of women in the past:

"They didn't look at themselves as I do. They didn't feel as I do. How could they? I don't want to be told when I wake up, terrified by a dream of total annihilation, because of the H-bomb exploding, that people felt that way about the crossbow. It isn't true. There is something new in the world. And I don't want to hear, when I've had [an] encounter with some Mogul in the film industry, who wields the kind of power over men's minds that no emperor ever did, and I come back feeling tramped on all over, that Lesbia felt like that after an encounter with her wine merchant."  
(472)

As a maternal figure, Mrs. Marks fails Anna by refusing to affirm her uniqueness. Anna's refusal to admit that her life

has been simply another version of women's experience or that her experience lies outside of history marks her separation from the maternal influence of her analyst.

Toward the novel's conclusion, Anna begins to value the process of breakdown as a means to discover who she is. She tells Mrs. Marks that she sometimes encounters people who "'are cracked across, they're split, [which] means they are keeping themselves open for something'" (473). In her preface to the Golden Notebook, Lessing explains that the process of breakdown "is a way of self-healing, of the inner self's dismissing false dichotomies and divisions" (viii). Lessing uses the example of Anna and Saul who "break through the false patterns they have made of their pasts" and begin to "hear each other's thoughts, recognise each other in themselves" (vii-viii). Therefore, Lessing represents this mutuality between Saul and Anna as a "borrowing" of each other's rhetorical dispositions. Anna notices at the end of her Golden Notebook that she speaks exactly like Saul, "precisely with his brand of sullenness--borrowed from him at a moment when he was not using it, so to speak" (622). Later, Anna recognizes her own rhetorical style in Saul's speech: "'That's the sort of thing I say, that kind of mocking, but you hardly ever do'" (624).

Anna insists on the uniqueness of her experience, and the reciprocity of individual personality traits between her and Saul suggests that the concept of personality Lessing



ultimately ascribes to Anna does not completely conform to the orthodox version of the Jungian archetypal self. Instead, Lessing's concept of personality in The Golden Notebook seems to endorse this pattern of breakdown and assimilation. In the first Black Notebook, Anna begins to question the concept of a unified personality when she attempts to capture the essence of Willi in her writing or to define the "core" of Maryrose's personality: "So what I am saying is, in fact, that the human personality, that unique flame, is so sacred to me, that everything else becomes unimportant? Is that what I am saying? And if so, what does it mean?" (71).

In the final notebook entries, Anna experiences an emotional alienation or Brechtian self-distance, but which allows her to temporarily identify with oppressed peoples such as the Algerian soldier undergoing torture (596; 600) or the pregnant peasant working for revolution in China, from whose perspective Anna sees Europe as "a tiny meaningless fringe on the great continent" (601-02). This dramatically readjusted global perspective is empathic and has the effect of the Brechtian gest in that her new way of seeing decenters Anna whose experience of "alien" personalities effects self-indifference: "I woke a person who had been changed by the experience of being other people. I did not care about Anna, I did not like being her" (601-02). Reentering the world from inside the perspectives of others does not help Anna to

"capture" another person's reality or to represent their perspectives more accurately than before; however, she does become changed by the experience of seeing from a perspective not confined by her own ideological predispositions. Anna's experience of others' perspectives represents a form of empathic engagement which allows her to see differently what she previously accepted as familiar. In representing Anna's encounter with Mrs. Marks, Lessing does not neatly map the Jungian process of individuation into an ordering and unifying psyche as much as she represents Anna's enhanced capacity for empathy, represented here as the experience of multiple and global perspectives.

## III

## Mother-Child Relations

## and the Exposure of Heterosexual Romance Ideology

In The Golden Notebook, the representation of the mother-child dyad often functions like the Brechtian gest in exposing models of dependency in heterosexual relationships. Lessing establishes a pattern of emotional contradiction in representing heterosexual relations in which men displace the role of children by demanding maternal attention from women who are their sexual partners. That women are often obliged to provide men with both emotional nurturing and sexual gratification is a commonplace heterosexual assumption, but Lessing exaggerates its banality by emphasizing the emotional dependency of Anna Wulf's male lovers who compete with her daughter for maternal affection. By representing emotionally dependent men who seek to dominate women's maternal and erotic functions, Lessing extends her critical focus on emotional contradiction to Anna Wulf's maternal relations with her male lovers. In complying with the contradictory demands placed on women in heterosexual relationships, women in the novel assume a childlike dependency on men who foster this attachment. Therefore, Lessing's use of the mother-child relationship exposes the conventional yet contradictory cultural impositions placed on women through heterosexual relations. The mother-child dyad operates like the social

gest because discourse about mothers in the novel ultimately becomes one way of addressing social divisions based on gender and examining the means by which men contain women within the heterosexual economy.

In the narrative sequences of The Golden Notebook, children do not figure prominently as interactive agents, but when they do appear, they often function to expose the social containment of women who are mothers within the patriarchal family. In a scene from the Red Notebook where Anna canvasses London voters for the Communist Party, she encounters "five lonely women going mad quietly by themselves, in spite of husband and children or rather because of them" (167). In the first section of Free Women, Anna remarks that other women feel a mixture of envy, distrust, and resentment toward her and Molly for their "free" marital status. At the same time, Anna and Molly envy the rapport between the milkman Mr. Gates and his son, revealing the ambiguity and difficulty both women experience as single mothers who have rejected the patriarchal family structure. Referring to Mr. Gates and his son, the narrator of Free Women states: "There was perfect understanding there; and the two women, both of them bringing up children without men, exchanged a grimacing envious smile" (11). There is no ideal patriarchal family represented in The Golden Notebook. In one of the few traditional families described, Molly's ex-husband Richard emotionally abandons

his current wife Marion by confining her and their three children to their suburban home. Traditional family structures represented in the novel usually expose the restraints which the patriarchal family structure places on women.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the fact that the maternal role is an important determinant in the representation of women in The Golden Notebook, the appearance of children in the novel is rare. When children do interact with maternal or parental figures, their role is usually minimized. Tommy is already twenty years old when his crucial interaction with his parents occurs in Free Women, and his childhood is never mentioned. His confrontation with Anna, Molly, and Richard serves to test their political convictions and occurs within the exclusive arena of adult conversation, providing Molly and Richard an occasion to air their differences. Anna's daughter Janet is rarely represented in the story; Lessing alludes to Janet's presence rather than actively engaging her in scenes where Anna struggles over her maternal responsibility. Similarly, Marie's illegitimate child, the source of much conflict for George Hounslow in the Black Notebook, is never represented for the reader. More surprisingly, Richard's and Marion's "three delightful little girls" (229) mentioned early in the novel are referred to later as "Richard's sons" and "the boys" in the final installment of Free Women (648).

Although Janet lives with her mother, she is completely absent from the first section of Free Women and is introduced only at the end of the first group of "The Notebooks" as part of a diary entry in Anna's Blue Notebook. In this section where Anna examines her emotional distance from Janet's father Max Wulf and the fact of Janet, their "marvelous baby" (231), she focuses not on the child as much as her own inability to play with her daughter, a symptom which she records as a "lack of feeling." Furthermore, Anna's primary emphasis in incorporating Janet into this scene is to compare her relationships with Max and her current lover Michael; therefore, she does not primarily address her relationship with her daughter.

Even though Janet is the central child character of The Golden Notebook, Lessing continually relegates her to the margins of the story. If she is present in a given scene, she is usually asleep or being put to bed by Anna. In Anna's critical confrontation with Tommy before he attempts suicide, Janet is in bed in her room and does not interact with her mother (257). In the second Blue Notebook, Anna brings Janet her breakfast in bed before school, and at the end of that same day, she again puts Janet to bed and brings her supper to her bedroom. Both incidents display an exaggerated maternal solicitude as Anna indulgently details the preparation of Janet's meals. Although these scenes may seem to contradict Anna's minimal interaction with Janet in

the text, it is important that they be read in light of Anna's knowledge that Michael is leaving her. Thus, in the breakfast scene in Janet's bedroom, Anna declares that "babying her, she has become the baby next door, the baby I won't have," that is, with Michael (335); and so in the evening scene in the child's room, Anna sings Janet to sleep with versions of "Rockabye Baby" (364). The effusive sentiment and solicitous detail of the scenes between Anna and Janet in her daughter's bedroom are part of Lessing's critical approach to the emotions, betraying Anna's anxiety about her sexual relationships more than her maternal affection for her daughter. More frequently, however, Janet is asleep, as in Free Women when Anna visits her bedside and feels a "surge of protective love" for the child after negotiating a family dispute between Richard and Molly (522). In the fourth Blue Notebook, another male companion named Nelson is careful to visit Anna only when Janet is asleep; and in the Golden Notebook and the final installment of Free Women, Janet is away at boarding school.

Anna's fictional discourse in the Yellow Notebook mirrors these scenes of absent and sleeping children. Ella, Anna's literary creation and alter ego, depends on her companion Julia to put her son Michael to bed each evening before returning home with her lover Paul. Ella's lovemaking with Paul and later with the American Cy Maitland is always structured around Michael's planned absence or more often,

his being asleep. Ella's relationship with Michael is practically identical to Anna's relationship with Janet, another example of Lessing's use of the Brechtian alienation technique whereby the narrator-subject becomes divided from her roles as a maternal character. Here, Anna is distanced from her role as mother in the creation of the maternal character Ella, whose mothering of both Michael and Paul mirrors and thus foregrounds the competition between Janet and Anna's male lovers for Anna's maternal attention.

The children Michael and Janet occupy marginal positions within the respective narratives of Ella's and Anna's sexual relationships. Neither Anna's lover Michael nor Ella's lover Paul is comfortable around the women's children, and both men refuse to show the children any affection. Their emotional distance is another strategy of alienation which further exaggerates their competitive relationships with the children for the mother's love. In fact, Michael often derides Anna's maternal responsibility when he feels deprived of Anna's attention, and when she cannot leave Janet to go out with him, he sarcastically complains: "Well, the cares of motherhood must ever come before lovers" (233). Aside from his lack of interest in Anna's maternal relationship with her daughter, he competes with Janet as a sibling rival. While Janet is waking in the next room, Michael sexually engages Anna in what she describes as both a betrayal of and an assertiveness toward Janet:



While Michael grips me and fills me the noises next door continue, and I know he hears them too, and that part of the pleasure, for him, is to take me in hazard; that Janet, the little girl, the eight-year-old, represents for him partly women--other women, whom he betrays to sleep with me; and partly, child; the essence of child, against whom he is asserting his rights to live. . . . My child, a few feet away through the wall, he will not allow to cheat him of his freedom. When we are finished, he says: "And now, Anna, I suppose you are going to desert me for Janet?" And he sounds like a child who feels himself slighted for a younger brother or sister. (334)

This passage provides one of several instances in the novel where men are depicted in sexual relationships with women as usurping the role of their children. However, what is disturbing about Anna's observation for the feminist reader is the complicity she admits in indulging Michael's need for mothering.

More explicitly, Anna expresses her maternal solicitude for men as she watches Michael sleeping next to her: "I was filled with an emotion one has, women have, about children: a feeling of fierce triumph: that against all odds, against the weight of death, this human being exists, here, a miracle of breathing flesh" (332). This passage clearly resonates with Anna's feeling of fierce protective love she feels while watching Janet sleep: "She looks defenceless, . . . and I have to check in myself a powerful impulse to protect her, to shut her away from possible harm" (364). In Free Women, Anna has similar thoughts while sitting next to her sleeping daughter and feels "the usual surge of protective love for Janet" (522). Anna self-consciously maintains her maternal

protection of Michael by naming Ella's child Michael, and through her fiction, Anna ironically continues to mother her former lover: "I used the name of my real lover for Ella's fictitious son with the small over-eager smile with which a patient offers an analyst evidence he has been waiting for but which the patient is convinced is irrelevant" (211). Anna's self-conscious maternal role in her relationships with men translates as an anxious complicity with heterosexist assumptions in her narrative.

Anna's nurturing impulse toward Michael, which she describes as a maternal response, is also extended to other men. Anna initially considers Nelson "grown-up" as she compares him with "the men I've been encountering recently . . . the men-babies" (483). Later she becomes disappointed when this same "responsible quiet man" regresses into child-like tantrums, as she observes his misogynic "highly verbal, bitterly humorous self-denunciation which switched at once into hysterical abuse of all women" (485). This incident in which Nelson acts out the emotional life of a child is duplicated in the behaviors of other men such as De Silva and Saul Green. De Silva is described by Anna as "an abject, mother-needing child" (501). In the first section of Free Women, Molly and Anna jokingly discuss the fact that men like De Silva tend to lose sexual interest in their spouses once their wives have given birth:

"Now we free women know that the moment the wives of our men friends go into the nursing home, dear

Tom, Dick, and Harry come straight over, they always want to sleep with one of their wives' friends, God knows why, a fascinating psychological fact among so many, but it's a fact." (27)

Anna relates her brief sexual interlude with De Silva by constantly referring to him as "the pathetic child," who complains to her with "the hysterical wail of a child" (502-03). This behavior almost perfectly matches Saul Green's matricidal tantrum when he pleads for the golden notebook which Anna has recently purchased:

[H]e stood glancing at me sideways, and murmuring, not laughing at all, gimme, gimme, gimme, in a child's voice. He had become a child. . . . His face, which when he is "himself," is good-humoured, shrewd, sceptical, was the face of a little murderer. (606)

In each sexual relationship, Anna is surprised by her seemingly limitless capacity for tolerance and compassion for men's childlike behavior. After an explosive episode with Nelson, she admits: "I am always amazed, in myself and in other women, at the strength of our need to bolster men up" (484). Because she finally admits that her nurturing of men is a need, Anna begins to recognize that her fostering of men's maternal dependency is actually a sign of her own dependence on male companionship.

Later in the Golden Notebook section, Anna conceives a storyline both "comic and ironic: A woman, appalled by her capacity for surrendering herself to a man, determines to free herself" (636). In this story outline, a woman seeks full emotional emancipation from two men, only to alienate

the one whom she loves and who in turn loves her. The defeat which Anna describes here anticipates the ambiguous resolution in her conflicted relationship with Saul Green. Here Anna suggests that emotional alienation is necessary to free herself from inordinate dependency on men in sexual relationships.

From the beginning of her friendship with Saul Green, Anna is frustrated by his disparate needs. In one argument, she feels outrage at being an object of cathexis for Saul's unresolved feelings toward his mother:

Like all Americans you've got mother-trouble. You've fixed on me for your mother. You have to outwit me all the time. . . . Then when I get hurt, your murderous feelings for me, for the mother, frighten you, so that you have to comfort and soothe me. . . . I'm bored with the nursery talk. I feel nauseated with the banality of it all. (581)

Yet Anna finds extricating herself from the complexity of Saul's needs almost impossible, and again she admits her complicity as both mother and lover:

[H]e was looking for this wise, kind, all-mother figure, who is also sexual playmate and sister; and because I had become part of him, this is what I was looking for too, both for myself, because I needed her, and because I wanted to become her. (my emphasis; 587)

Consonant with the thematics of psychological breakdown, Anna confesses her dual fear of merging her identity with Saul Green and of becoming like her own mother whom she desires to recreate but whom she no longer remembers. This crisis of identity recurs even at the end of her relationship

with Saul when she embraces him, futilely attempting to resist his desire to be nurtured:

He clung to me, immediately, for a second of genuine closeness. Then at once, my falseness created his, for he murmured, in a child's voice: "Ise a good boy," not as he had ever whispered to his own mother, for those words could never have been his, they were out of literature. And he murmured them mawkishly, in parody. But not quite. Yet as I looked down at him, I saw his sharp ill face show first the sentimental falseness that went with the words; then a grimace of pain; then, seeing me look down, in horror, his grey eyes narrowed into a pure hating challenge, and we looked at each other helpless with our mutual shame and humiliation. (640-41)

The parodic mother-child relationship enacted by Saul and Anna functions like the Brechtian gest in that it foregrounds the conflict between Anna's maternal and erotic functions and delineates the social disjunction between women's sexual activity and their nurturing of children. In the heterosexual relationships of The Golden Notebook, men not only usurp the role of children by demanding that their lovers mother them, but in doing so, they call attention to the social contradiction which demands a strict separation between women's maternal and erotic activities.

Molly's ex-husband Richard unconsciously supports this separation of the maternal and the erotic by his frustration with Marion's boredom as a housewife and mother, a boredom he fuels by his inattention to her. As though he expects Marion's maternal role to preclude other desires, he exasperatingly asks her, "you've got the children, haven't you?" (281). And when Marion finally does have an affair

and threatens to leave him, Richard desperately woos Marion back into his household with the children instead of permitting her to pursue her own sexual pleasure as he does. Anna voices this same distinction between the erotic and the maternal when she refers to her "two personalities": "He [Michael] prefers Janet to have left for school before he wakes. And I prefer it, because it divides me. The two personalities--Janet's mother, Michael's mistress, are happier separated" (336).

The disjunction between the maternal and the erotic is further emphasized by Lessing's use of a startlingly graphic maternal image, that of a man giving birth to a woman. Through this physical or biological impossibility, Lessing exposes the conventional romance ideology which promotes the myth that only men are able to awaken women sexually. As children are marginalized in the novel by being represented as sleeping, the unconscious child becomes a metaphor for "sexually awakened" women who have paradoxically become narcotized by romantic relationships and thus deprived of their autonomy. Like the Brechtian technique of alienation which is meant to startle the audience, the unsettling description of men's romantic involvement with women is accomplished through a provocative maternal metaphor as a process whereby men give birth to emotionally immature women and subsequently suppress their freedom by putting them to sleep.<sup>56</sup> Anna most poignantly illustrates this

infantilization of women in her description of Ella's naïveté regarding Paul, an attitude which she compares to her own feelings for Michael:

From the moment Ella meets Paul and loves him, from the moment she uses the word love, there is the birth of naivety.

And so now, looking back at my relationship with Michael, . . . I see above all my naivety. Any intelligent person could have foreseen the end of this affair from its beginning. And yet I, Anna, like Ella with Paul, refused to see it. Paul gave birth to Ella, the naïve Ella. He destroyed in her the knowing, doubting, sophisticated Ella and again and again he put her intelligence to sleep, and with her willing connivance, so that she floated darkly on her love for him, on her naivety, which is another word for spontaneous creative faith. And when his own distrust of himself destroyed this woman-in-love, so that she began thinking, she would fight to return to naivety. [my emphasis] (211)

The "spontaneous creative faith" Anna equates with naïve love is a delusory, self-destructive attitude, or what Ella later admits is a lie to which women succumb, whereby a "man's desire creates a woman's desire" (456). When Ella critically examines the end of her relationship with Paul, she reflects on the myth which dictates that a woman's sexuality is defined exclusively by man's desire:

That when she loved a man again, she would return to normal: a woman, that is, whose sexuality would ebb and flow in response to his. A woman's sexuality is, so to speak, contained by a man, if he is a real man; she is, in a sense, put to sleep by him, she does not think about sex.

(my emphasis; 455)

Ella's strict self-imposed sexual abstinence after Paul's departure allows her the necessary critical distance to see the perversity of what she previously considered normal

sexuality for a woman: that is, the myth that a woman's sexual response is a function of a man's desire.

Lessing does not offer a neatly summarized resolution to the heterosexist contradictions which she exposes in The Golden Notebook; instead, she dramatizes how the cultural assumptions of a predominantly heterosexual society are reproduced with the complicity of women. Lessing's effective use of the mother-child parody between Anna and Saul stylizes and exaggerates heterosexist attitudes about women's social and sexual roles. Saul blatantly admits his resentment of Anna's success as a writer as well as his hypocrisy in enjoying "a society where women are second-class citizens" (605). Anna justifies his admitted contradiction and absolves him by stating that women "have to rely for company on men who are at least not hypocrites" (605). When Saul then orders her to make coffee "because that is your role in life," Anna's happy compliance has a disturbing effect since it contradicts her usual independence. But Lessing blurs the distinction between the couple's parody and their actual relations when Anna later reflects that she will miss "the pleasure of looking after a man" when Saul leaves (605). In the final section of Free Women, Anna's new job of counseling married couples strangely mirrors Ella's vocation of editing a middle-class women's magazine which perpetrates many heterosexist cultural assumptions through its publication of



romance fiction and sexual advice for housewives in their relationships with their husbands.

Lessing offers the possibility of women's resistance to male domination by raising Anna's awareness of the contradictions imposed on women through their enthrallment by men. With more critical insight than Ella, Anna not only detects men's imposition of maternal demands on women, but she sees the logic whereby men turn this demand into women's dependency on men. When De Silva becomes "an abject, mother-needing child" in his sexual encounter with Anna, she admits that "of course, it's him, not me. For men create these things, they create us" [my emphasis] (501). And as she falls in love with Saul Green, Anna testifies to the existence of "a creature [that] is born in her, of emotional and sexual response, that grows in its own laws, its own logic" (561).

Throughout the progress of The Golden Notebook, Anna realizes she can "assess the depth of a possible relationship with [a man] by the degree to which the naïve Anna is re-created" (212). The act of falling in love with a man and being reborn into a state of innocence is something Anna would now avoid, and she controverts the upside-down logic of men giving birth to child-like women by announcing her refusal to reproduce this logic: "I would begin a deliberately barren limited relationship" (212). This emotional distancing, like Brecht's alienation technique, is

a feminist gesture which exposes the ideology of heterosexual romance in its privileging of male eroticism as a reference for defining female pleasure. If a romantic involvement with a man creates a woman whose intellect is like that of a sleeping child, Anna refuses to reproduce this heterosexual ideology by electing to become emotionally barren. This metaphorical barrenness produces the "critical" Anna/Ella who fights to assert herself in the face of this oppression. Emotional barrenness in the form of critical distancing is Anna's strategy to avoid the disastrous effects of emotional surrender which she found ultimately disabling in previous relationships. Barrenness thus becomes a metaphor of refusal to reproduce oppressive power relations whereby men subordinate women, and it also becomes synonymous with Anna's inability to write and the lack of feeling she detects as a symptom of her failure. This metaphor which rejects maternity becomes Lessing's rhetorical strategy for examining the heterosexual assumptions which induce women to become sleeping children in romantic relationships.

## IV

## Conclusion

Metaphorical barrenness, however, is not Lessing's final strategy for Anna's resistance of the political and sexual injustices represented in the novel. Lessing also evokes scenes of graphic sexual violence and psychological manipulation to explore male dominance in heterosexual relationships. For example, Saul's misogynic speech, described by Anna as "a machine-gun ejaculating regularly," inseminates her with self-hatred. Anna feels that Saul's repetitive "I I I I I" aims "a pure stream of hatred at me, for being a woman," and she begins "weeping, luxuriating in the weakness" (630). Lessing then establishes an emotional distance between the characters by underscoring the parody they perform of their own actions. Anna is not left "luxuriating" in a powerless condition but instead self-consciously sentimentalizes her social position as "the white female bosom shot full of cruel male arrows" (636); Saul likewise assumes "the gallant parody of the rake's stance" (641). Anna also imagines a story about a woman "determined to free herself" from male subjugation (636), yet she cradles Saul in her arms as they perform a final parody of a destructive mother-child relationship (640). After the patterns of female dependency and male dominance are represented through the distancing effect of parody in the

novel, the final scene in Anna's Golden Notebook can also be read as an allegory of male/female reciprocity, since Saul gives Anna the opening line to a story she has already written (and that we readers have already read), and Anna also reveals the outline of a story Saul supposedly will write in the future.

Underlying the fact of male dominance in heterosexual relationships in Anna's fiction is the anxiety Paul Tanner expresses to Ella that women will eventually be able to conceive children without men: "'You can apply ice to a woman's ovaries, for instance. She can have a child. Men are no longer necessary to humanity'" (213). Despite Ella's amusement over this idea, Paul's paranoia about the advance of reproductive technology suggests a fear that the human species will continue independent of emotional relationships, whereby women have no longer been subjugated. As if to parody the emotional distancing between men and women which Paul seems to fear, Anna adds a news clipping to her Blue Notebook insinuating that technology exaggerates the distance between progenitors and progeny:

The technique of quick-freezing germ-cells and keeping them indefinitely can mean a complete change in the significance of time. At present it applies to the male sperm, but it might also be adapted to the female ovum. A man alive in 1951 and a woman alive in 2,051 might be "mated" in 2,251 to produce a child by a pre-natal foster-mother. (242)

In both passages, cryogenic technologies operating in the service of sexual reproduction become metaphors for emotional

distance. Anna earlier admits that her anger toward Michael "froze everything," and she describes herself in analysis from the emotional distance of the omniscient narrator: "Anna Wulf is sitting in a chair in front of a soul doctor. She is there because she cannot deeply feel about anything. She is frozen" (235).

But here, the process of freezing paradoxically marks the death of feeling and the potential for life. Anna's solitary news clipping about reproductive technology stands alone amidst a series of other news items about war, political persecution, imminent global starvation, nuclear proliferation, and "the spectre of general annihilation" (243). While these clippings coincide with Anna's fear of dissolution and the thematics of breakdown, the single news item about the possibility of future conception, despite its presumption of emotional alienation, offers an exceptional promise of life in contrast to the threat of human extinction heralded by the surrounding headlines and news stories.

Anna witnesses a similar life-in-death scenario illuminated by the dream projectionist which she records in the Golden Notebook. In this dream, she watches the explosion of the Mashopi Hotel "in a dancing, whirling cloud of white petals or wings, millions of white butterflies," which at the same time is "the explosion of the hydrogen bomb. . . unbelievably beautiful, the shape of death" (617). Instead of experiencing a feeling of annihilation, however,

Anna recalls in her dream the sexual activity of grasshoppers in Mashopi, "their gross tumbling fecundity inches deep" (617). Earlier during the film projection sequence in the Golden Notebook, the Mashopi butterflies confront Anna as chaos, an "orderless dance" which she feels powerless to recreate in a meaningful form (619-20). Now, Anna recuperates these images of death and fertility which were formerly tainted with nostalgia from the Black Notebook and reconstructs them as contradictory but coexisting forces, leading her to assent to Mrs. Marks:

"We're back at the blade of grass again, that will press up through bits of rusted steel a thousand years after the bombs have exploded and the world's crust is melted. Because the force of will in the blade of grass is the same as the small painful endurance." (636).

Anna's admission that "injustice and cruelty is at the root of life" and her acceptance of this final contradiction enables her to face the challenge of existence with the "small painful sort of courage which is at the root of every life" (636).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Among the most recent studies which take this approach, see Molly Hite's "The Future in a Different Shape" in her book The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) 55-102, as well as Hite's "Subverting the Ideology of Coherence: The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City" in Doris Lessing: The Alchemy of Survival, eds. Karey Caplan and Ellen Cronan Rose (Ohio UP, 1988); Jeannette King's "The Golden Notebook and Reflexive Form" in her book Doris Lessing (London: Routledge, 1989) 36-54; Claire Sprague's Rereading Doris Lessing: Narrative Pattern of Doubling and Repetition (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 1987). See also Betsy Draine's "The Golden Notebook: The Construction of a Postmodern Order" in her book Substance Under Pressure: Artistic Coherence and Evolving Form in the Novels of Doris Lessing (Madison, U of Wisconsin, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> In terms of women's social experience, see my Introduction (n. 1) where I acknowledge Nicole-Claude Mathieu's distinctions between biological maternity and social maternity. Although the principal women characters of The Golden Notebook are biological mothers, their social subjectivity is of more concern to Lessing.

<sup>3</sup> See Judith Kegan Gardiner, Rhys, Stead, Lessing, and the Politics of Empathy (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989). Further references to Gardiner's essay will be cited parenthetically in the text.

Gardiner critically juxtaposes three novels which she discusses in the context of familial metaphors, each identifying with a different literary tradition that is either revised, rewritten, or interrogated: Wide Sargasso Sea and The Man Who Loved Children respectively represent the "mother-identified" and "father-identified" literary periods of nineteenth-century fiction by women and the tradition of psychological realism. The Golden Notebook, as an example of "iconoclastic postmodernism," represents a textually "self-originating child" in that it "questions its origins until this authorial questioning becomes much of what the novel is about, and transmission of the experience of dislocation, its accomplishment" (124). While the familial metaphors provide an adequate organizing principle for these three texts, I find that Gardiner does not sufficiently contextualize the concept of empathy within her discussion.

<sup>4</sup> Gardiner initially proposes a critical approach based on the dialogic relationship between three analytical concepts--empathy, history, and identity or the self--which she respectively associates with "American feminist psychoanalysis, English materialism, and the French poststructuralist attack on identity" (2). However, Gardiner's "politics of empathy," rather than being placed on an equal footing with critical concepts of "the self or identity" and "history" as she originally suggests, instead becomes inflected by historical understanding. Gardiner's initial insistence on treating history as a separate critical category is confusing, and she unnecessarily delays the inevitable placement of history in the service of empathy, her primary investigative concept.

<sup>5</sup> Gardiner's facile identification of Kohut's definition of empathy with a feminine point of view leads her to generalize that "[e]mpathy in twentieth-century Western culture has become a specially marked female trait, cognitive as well as affective, and potentially either good or ill, compassionate or manipulative and intrusive" (2). Furthermore, her theoretical justification for choosing empathy as a critical focal point is sketchy.

<sup>6</sup> Gardiner cites but does not discuss the theories of Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Carol Gilligan.

<sup>7</sup> See A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (London: Routledge, 1988) 26. Further references will be cited within the text.

<sup>8</sup> Lessing's novel anticipates the first national conference in Great Britain on Women's Liberation (1970), followed in subsequent years by the organization and activities of a variety of socialist-feminist groups.

<sup>9</sup> See Molly Hite's "The Future in a Different Shape: Broken Form and Possibility in The Golden Notebook" in her book The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) 55-102. See also Hite's article, "Subverting the Ideology of Coherence: The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City" in Doris Lessing: The Alchemy of Survival, eds. Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose (Ohio UP, 1988) 61-69.

<sup>10</sup> See Brecht on Theatre, trans. and ed. John Willett (1957; London: Methuen, 1964) 91. Subsequent references are cited within the text.

<sup>11</sup> In opposing empathy to alienation, Brecht intended to thwart a spectator's urge to identify with characters on the stage in order to challenge them with the social and



political ideas presented in the play. To destroy the illusion encouraged by Aristotelian drama, Brecht often recommends various techniques to accomplish the "A-effect." For example, in "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect," Brecht comments:

The theatre can create the corresponding A-effect in the performance in a number of ways. The Munich production of Edward II for the first time had titles preceding the scenes, announcing the contents. The Berlin production of The Threepenny Opera had titles of the songs projected while they were sung. The Berlin production of Mann ist Mann had the actors' figures projected on big screens during the action. (143)

These examples are quite similar to Lessing's lengthy summary titles to *Free Women* and to Anna's use of the dream projectionist in *The Blue Notebook* and *The Golden Notebook*, whereby previously introduced characters become "actors" whom Anna "re-visions" in her narrative.

<sup>12</sup> According to Willett, contradiction is an increasingly important concept in Brecht's theoretical writings. Brecht's appropriation of the term takes into account its Marxist meaning as "the conflicting elements in any person or situation." See Brecht on Theatre 51.

<sup>13</sup> Doris Lessing, The Golden Notebook (New York: Bantam, 1981) 13, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>14</sup> See Each His Own Wilderness in New English Dramatists: Three Plays. Ed. E. Martin Browne. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1959); and Play with a Tiger: A Play in Three Acts. (London: Michael Joseph, 1962).

<sup>15</sup> See Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-War British Drama. (London: Methuen, 1987). Page references are cited within the text.

Wandor cites Shelagh Delaney's A Taste of Honey (1958) as one of the first examples of post-war British drama to have motherhood as "a central theme" (39). According to Wandor, Helen the mother "is allowed the space to have vigour, motherhood and sexuality" (40). Wandor summarizes Delaney's contribution to an emerging feminist tradition in post-war drama:

The appearance of motherhood as subject matter (an "outsider" subject?) breaks an unspoken taboo on theatrical content, which in the vast majority of plays is defined by issues of direct concern

to men. The gender bias in this play is also reversed from that of most other plays, in that it is the women we follow from scene to scene. The men come and go according to the needs of the women characters.

Women playwrights' disruption of male bias in post-war drama is clearly applicable to the content of Lessing's two plays which were produced that same year. For example, Each His Own Wilderness features two women as central characters who later emerge as Molly and Anna in The Golden Notebook. Also, Lessing's novel, like Delaney's play, maintains the centrality of the mother with men who appear and retreat "according to the needs of women characters."

In Play With a Tiger, the female protagonist Anna Freeman is clearly Lessing's prototype for Anna Freeman Wulf of The Golden Notebook. Like the relationship between Anna and Molly, the important friendship between Anna Freeman and Janet Stephens "exists in a world where relationships with men take up a lot of time and attention" (Wandor 53).

<sup>16</sup> Robert Arlett claims that it is hardly necessary to make a case for Lessing's knowledge of Brechtian stage theory:

Free Women takes place in 1957, a year after the Berliner Ensemble presented the works of Brecht, recently dead, to a London audience. Brecht's theories of dramaturgy quickly influenced such British playwrights as John Osborne, John Arden, and Lessing herself. (70)

See "The Dialectical Epic: Brecht and Lessing," in Twentieth Century Literature 33.1 (1987): 67-79. Further references are cited within the text.

<sup>17</sup> Wandor states that "[t]his conscious politicising of the form and content of plays had been influencing drama since the mid-1950s when the Berliner Ensemble began visiting Britain" (91). According to John Willett, Brecht's purpose in forming the Berliner Ensemble after the first production of Mother Courage in Berlin (January 1949) "was to establish similar 'model' productions of his other plays" (222).

<sup>18</sup> Acting, according to Brecht, "has nothing to do with forced objectivity, for the actors adopt an attitude to their parts; and nothing to do with mock-rationalism; . . . it is simply due to the fact that plays are no longer subjected to red-hot 'temperamental' acting" (235-36).

<sup>19</sup> Brecht saw the epic theatre as making use of "the new social scientific method known as dialectical materialism" (193). His last theoretical writings were entitled "Dialectics in the Theatre" and suggest his

eventual dissatisfaction with the term "epic theatre," which "does not of itself imply that productivity and mutability of society." See Brecht on Theatre 281-82.

<sup>20</sup> See Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," Drama Review 32.1 (1988): 83. I am grateful to Susan Smith for calling my attention to this essay.

<sup>21</sup> Wandor bases her claims on data from Elizabeth Wilson's Women and the Welfare State (London: Tavistock, 19--).

<sup>22</sup> Wandor is referring specifically to Shelagh Delaney's A Taste of Honey (Theatre Royal Stratford, May 1958).

<sup>23</sup> Despite their socialist sympathies, both Brecht and Lessing deeply resented the strictures of doctrinaire socialist realism. Brecht's abhorrence of the intransigent cultural policies that bind artists to the rigid formulas of artistic production forced him to complain that "our socialist realism must also be a critical realism" (268). Anna's exasperation over the interchangeable letters she receives from Party members or her despair over reading formulaic fiction sent by aspiring writers from the Party ranks is similar to Brecht's inveighing against the levelling influence of a politically dictated aesthetic: "It's not the job of the Marxist-Leninist party to organize production of poems as on a poultry farm. If it did, the poems would resemble one another like so many eggs" (269).

<sup>24</sup> See The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1989) 101. Further references are cited within the text.

<sup>25</sup> In an attempt to apply Brechtian stage theory to Lessing's text, Robert Arlett argues that different versions of narrative in The Golden Notebook undercut "expected versions of reality [and] parallel Brechtian distancing technique" by reflecting "the complexities of modern experience" (70). However, Arlett's comparison of Brecht and Lessing, prompted largely by the fact that Willi Rodde whistles a verse from Brecht's The Threepenny Opera, overlooks the startling affinities between Brecht's theory and textual details from Lessing's novel.

<sup>26</sup> Kohut's definition of empathy (as employed by Gardiner), enabling one person to experience the "inner life of another," would thus be irrelevant to Brecht's theory.

<sup>27</sup> See A Poetics of Postmodernism 23.

<sup>28</sup> See The Politics of Postmodernism 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter 6, "Postmodernism and Feminisms" in The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1989) 141-168.

<sup>30</sup> The emphases, which are Lessing's, contribute to the foregrounding of Brecht's tune by calling attention to the musical accents of the lyrics.

<sup>31</sup> Brecht considered the 1928 production of The Threepenny Opera his "most successful demonstration of the epic theatre" (Brecht on Theatre 85).

<sup>32</sup> As a contradictory personality, Willi is not unlike Richard, a corporate executive and Molly's ex-husband, who refuses to admit emotional inconsistencies and has "always got to either like or dislike someone" (4). Aware of this dualistic thinking, Molly criticizes Richard's preoccupation with his sexual dysfunction because he defines impotence as only a physical condition:

And Molly came in with: "Physical you say? Physical? It's emotional. You started sleeping around early in your marriage because you had an emotional problem, it's nothing to do with physical."

"No? Easy for women."

"No, it's not easy for women. But at least we've got more sense than to use physical and emotional as though they didn't connect." (31)

Richard's separation of the emotional and the physical components of his sexuality characterizes his experience according to the same dialectical tensions which inform Willi's personality.

<sup>33</sup> For example, Gardiner argues that the world of The Golden Notebook is divided into strict private and public spheres and that Anna Wulf never reconciles the two (143-152). On the other hand, Betsy Draine reads the novel as "Anna Wulf's transformation of personal and political consciousness" (69). See Substance under Pressure: Artistic Coherence and Evolving Form in the Novels of Doris Lessing (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1983).

<sup>34</sup> See "Britain's New Feminist Drama," 150. Other page references are cited within the text.

<sup>35</sup> Diamond states: "I realize that feminists . . . might greet this coupling with some bemusement. Brecht exhibits a typical Marxian blindness toward gender relations, and except for some interesting excursions into erotic male violence, he created conventionally gendered plays and too many saintly mothers (one is too many)" (83).

See "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism."

<sup>36</sup> Diamond quotes from Brecht on Theatre, 105.

<sup>37</sup> See Barbara Bellow Watson's "On Power and the Literary Text," Signs 1.1 (1975) 117.

<sup>38</sup> Brecht's reference to "conscious imitation" occurs in the context of defining the "positive hero" in drama. According to Brecht, empathy is an "ineffective" feeling to evoke in the spectator since feeling without understanding can hardly stimulate the spectator's capacity for heroism.

<sup>39</sup> See Lessing's "Introduction" to The Golden Notebook where she discusses her unanticipated reception of her novel as a "tract about the sex war" (x). Here, she states what she believed to be her primary focus in writing The Golden Notebook: "yet the essence of the book, the organization of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalise. 'Bound. Free. Good. Bad. Yes. No. Capitalism. Socialism. Sex. Love. . . .' says Anna, in Free Women, stating a theme-- shouting it, announcing a motif with drums and fanfares. . . or so I imagined" (x). Lessing admits that the public reception of the novel has altered her own understanding of her writing, and while she steadfastly refuses to say the novel's exclusive concern is "the sex war," she concedes that "all sorts of ideas and experiences I didn't recognize as mine emerged when writing" and that the process of composition "changed me" (x). Thus she sees The Golden Notebook as not strictly addressing one issue, either the sex war or fragmentation, but both these and other issues.

<sup>40</sup> References to Marx and Stalin recur throughout The Golden Notebook. While Adam Smith is not specifically mentioned, Richard Portmain becomes a caricature of capitalism's economic self-interest. The colonial period of Zimbabwe (1890-1980), represented in the Rhodesian setting of the Black Notebook, was initiated by Cecil John Rhodes. The middle-class Boothby family represents the English colonial mind-set of Lessing's fictional Mashopi. Although Freud is mentioned in The Golden Notebook, Jungian psychology plays a more important role in the novel. Lessing's creation of a female analyst who functions as a mother surrogate is part of her interrogation of Jungian theory.

<sup>41</sup> The social and political spheres of Marxism and capitalism are seen by Gardiner as masculine and public domains, but each of these systems irrevocably inscribes Anna's social identity as equally as her more personal

relationships with Janet, Molly, or Mrs. Marks. Gardiner's reading does not discuss the political or ideological systems as dominant motifs in the novel.

<sup>42</sup> Betsy Draine describes the multiple sections of The Golden Notebook as creating a fragmented consciousness, "an image not only of Lessing's personal condition, but also of a public condition called the postmodern consciousness (47). See "Nostalgia and Irony: The Postmodern Order of The Golden Notebook," Modern Fiction Studies 26 (1980) 31-48.

<sup>43</sup> Stern comments that the "politically concerned" characters of The Golden Notebook "are growing profoundly disillusioned with communism, while remaining sharply at odds with Western 'bourgeois' politics" (42), and that Free Women "reflects a gradual political disengagement from the Communist movement and the breakdown of that movement in the later fifties" (41). In mapping the political climate of Britain in the late 1950s, Stern asserts that Molly and Anna would inevitably choose the Labour Party affiliation after becoming disillusioned with the Communist Party:

Many intellectuals joined the Labour party, which at its foundation promised to embody Socialist values and goals within the British parliamentary system. At a time when the whole Western world appeared to be moving to the right, it was the logical choice for leftists wishing to stay involved in politics on some level. The Tory, or Conservative, party, similar in some ways to the American Republican party, was obviously not an option. The Liberal party, like the American Democratic party, would seem too firmly a part of the establishment and too reformist for Anna to consider. (Stern 41)

See "Politics and The Golden Notebook" in Approaches to Teaching Lessing's "The Golden Notebook," eds. Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose (New York: MLA, 1989) 37-42.

<sup>44</sup> See "Subverting the Ideology of Coherence: The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City," in Kapland and Rose, Ohio U. Press (1988), especially page 61.

<sup>45</sup> See also Patrocínio P. Schweickart's "Reading a Wordless Statement: The Structure of Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook" where she argues that more than a "perspicacious commentary on reality," one of the more important "structural qualities of Lessing's novel is the way it . . . mediates the passage from the problematics of writing to the problematics of reading (265). As a narrative of "hinged articulation," the novel's "production of meaning is possible because the connectedness of the text does not cancel out its discontinuities" (268); and Kathryn

Fishburn's "Wor(1)ds within Words: Doris Lessing as Meta-fictionist and Meta-physician," which laments the unfortunate but widespread perception that Lessing writes in the "old-fashioned school of expressive realism. . . deflecting critical attention away from those very qualities of her fiction that serve to undermine and de(con)struct realistic texts' (186).

<sup>46</sup> In her article "The Way of All Ideology," Susan Griffin quotes from Isaac Deutscher's Stalin: A Political Biography: "Speaking of Stalin's behavior during the period of Soviet industrialization and agricultural collectivization after 1929, Deutscher writes: 'He was now completely possessed by the idea that he could achieve a miraculous transformation of the whole of Russia by a single tour de force. He seemed to live in a half-real and half-dreamy world of statistical figures and indices of industrial orders and instructions, a world in which no target and no objective seemed to be beyond his and the party's grasp'" (285). See Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology, eds. Nannerl O. Keohane et al. (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>47</sup> Anna records the following conversation with her friend Jack at Communist Party headquarters: "We finally decide, not for the first time, that Stalin must have been clinically mad. We sit drinking tea and eating sandwiches and speculating about whether, if we had lived in the Soviet Union during his last years, we would have decided it was part of our duty to assassinate him. Jack says no; Stalin is so much a part of his experience, his deepest experience, that even if he knew him to be criminally insane, when the moment came to pull the trigger he couldn't do it: he would turn the revolver on himself instead" (352).

<sup>48</sup> See Elizabeth Abel, "Resisting the Exchange: Brother-Sister Incest in the Fiction of Doris Lessing," in Doris Lessing: The Alchemy of Survival, eds. Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose (Ohio UP, 1988) 115-126. Abel discusses Tommy in the context of the Oedipal tragedy, but Lessing's phrase "paralysis of the will" suggests that Tommy's dilemma is similar to Hamlet's crisis as well, in that Tommy agonizes between playing a role as a dutiful son and rejecting parental expectations in favor of what he could consider to be significant or meaningful personal action.

<sup>49</sup> Abel, 121.

<sup>50</sup> While Marion does not directly enter the Communism-capitalism debate, her refusal to conform to a single system is indirectly involved in this debate. As a bored housewife

who is confined to Richard's suburban home, Marion manifests her unhappiness through alcoholism, a signal that she will not conform absolutely to her assigned role in the capitalist system, that is, the support and maintenance of Richard's hegemonic role as business entrepreneur.

<sup>51</sup> Lessing's inclusion of the dream-parable probably communicates a more pointed political message. The first publication of The Golden Notebook in 1962 coincides with the end of the Algerian revolution against French occupation which lasted approximately 130 years (1830-1961). Therefore, the story not only exposes colonialism's need for victims to justify its domination, but it illustrates the hegemony of imported Western thought and culture even within the newly formed Algerian nationalist movement whose members begin to detect how they "ought to be envying" the cultural heritage of their oppressors. In the context of Free Women, Lessing demonstrates that colonialism is not restricted to issues of race, ethnicity, or nationality alone but to gender as well.

<sup>52</sup> See Eve Bertelsen's "The Golden Notebook: The African Background," in Approaches to Teaching Lessing's "The Golden Notebook" (eds. Kaplan and Rose), where she contextualizes the ineffectiveness of the pre-World War II radical left in Rhodesia: "But classical Marxist theory was inappropriate in a racially divided society where blacks were excluded not only from the unions but from all skilled labor. Serious class analysis in southern Africa had to wait until alternative models, drawn from comparable struggles in Cuba and China, became available to plot a course for the revolutionary transformation of colonial and peasant economies" (61).

<sup>53</sup> Arlette, 69.

<sup>54</sup> See "The Principal Archetypal Elements of The Golden Notebook," in Approaches to Teaching Lessing's "The Golden Notebook" eds. Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose (New York: Modern Language Association, 1989) 50. Further references are cited within the text.

<sup>55</sup> Lessing also thematizes the family's restraint on the mother in her short story "To Room Nineteen."

<sup>56</sup> Hélène Cixous makes a similar observation in her essay "Castration or Decapitation":

In La Jeune Née I made use of a story that seemed to me particularly expressive of woman's place: the story of Sleeping Beauty. Woman, if you look for her, has a strong chance of always being found in one position, in bed. In bed and asleep--"laid (out)." She is always to be found



on or in a bed: Sleeping Beauty is lifted from her bed by a man because, as we all know, women don't wake up by themselves; man has to intervene, you understand. She is lifted up by the man who will lay her in her next bed so that she may be confined to bed ever after, just as the fairy tales say. (43)

See Signs: 7.1 (1981) 41-55.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Producing a Womanist Text: The Maternal as Signifier in Alice Walker's The Color Purple

All of the women in Alice Walker's The Color Purple participate in a variety of activities which are traditionally associated with the responsibilities of motherhood, ranging beyond childbirth to the rearing and nurturing of infants and children. However, Walker clearly does not promote a cult of the mother in this novel, for she neither endorses ideological notions which romanticize the activities of mothering nor does she represent women whose identities become defined solely through childbearing or their desire for children. Instead, The Color Purple represents the complex and often contradictory attitudes about mothering which Afro-centric mothering theorists describe. Barbara Christian, for example, has emphasized the contradictions inherent in the African-American woman's reproductive role in that giving birth represents the culmination of the process of physical maturation and therefore confers status and respect on the mother.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, Christian points to the fact that "Afro-American motherhood is also a battleground for racist and sexist ideology and exists within the context of the prevailing view of motherhood in the United States" (219).<sup>2</sup>

Women as maternal subjects in The Color Purple represent this complex and often contradictory variety of responses to maternity which Christian articulates. In Celie's case, for example, childbearing is oppressive because she is raped repeatedly by her stepfather and gives birth to two children in her early adolescence, a trauma which ends her reproductive capability. She remains psychologically scarred by the memory of incest and her stepfather's theft of her two infants; subsequently she is forced to enter an adversarial relationship as stepmother to Albert's hostile children. For other women such as Sofia and Corrine, mothering is not as traumatic as Celie's experience but rather assumes relevance as one of the traditional "women's responsibilities" within the wider scope of activities that form a part of daily existence. In the case of Shug who gives birth to several children during her affair with Albert, motherhood conflicts with her social identity, and she has little choice but to abandon her children to her parents who first censure her and then force her to leave home. Despite the fact that women such as Nettie and Corrine do not experience biological maternity and childbirth, they nevertheless join all the other women in the novel whose domestic relations include the nurturing and rearing of children, which in The Color Purple are more often than not performed by women other than a child's biological mother. Given this commonality among women in

Walker's novel, it is surprising that so few readers engage in a sustained critical examination of the importance of mothers in Walker's fiction, and especially of how they function to produce meaning in The Color Purple.<sup>3</sup>

The critical focus on motherhood in this novel is usually subsumed under general discussions of the representation of women, especially the development of Celie's identity or her personal growth through involvement in the novel's sexual politics.<sup>4</sup> But aside from the wide range of personal and social identities of the mother which enhance the novel's realism, the women of The Color Purple contribute more importantly to Walker's textual encoding of actual maternal relationships to produce a "womanist" prose fiction.<sup>5</sup> Although Walker invents the term "womanist" from her necessity to inscribe a place for women of color within a feminist culture which she finds overwhelmingly white and middle-class, the origin of the term suggests a specific maternal relationship. Walker derives the term "womanist" from "womanish," a lexical element originating in the African-American folk dialect of mothers to indicate the "grown up" or even "sassy" behavior of their daughters or other young female family members.<sup>6</sup> For Walker, "womanist" is synonymous with "responsible" and "serious" and indicates a variety of precocious behaviors: "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful" (In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens xi).

Beyond these personal attributes of the precocious female child, "womanist" also signifies a simultaneously sexual politics of social identification among all women as "sisters" and the exclusion of sexual separatism:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health." (xi)

If the term "womanish" originates and operates within mother-daughter relationships, then by analogy, this second lexical register of "womanist" values and sororal relationships can be qualified as "maternal." In further delineating "womanist" inclusivity to represent a wider spectrum of human concerns, Walker reinforces the maternal underpinnings of her womanist concept by including an anecdote between a mother and child to illustrate her definition: "Traditionally universalist, as in: 'Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?' Ans.: 'Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden with every flower represented' (xi). By invoking terms and conversations from her maternal ancestry to include the experiences and concerns of African-American women in a feminist culture, Walker creates a neologism with an extensive range of personal and social

semantic registers which informs her womanist theory and practice.

As Walker envisions the semantic evolution of the term "womanist," she indicates aesthetic preferences which are no less personal or political in their insistence on self esteem and solidarity with all African Americans: "Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless" (her emphases; xii). The playful yet philosophical and poetic temperament of this definition suggests Walker's aesthetic preference for traditional "feminine" principles, for example, "moon" and "roundness." Her valorization of pleasure and sensuality ("food," "music," and "dance") is strikingly analogous to Hélène Cixous's concept of a "feminine economy."<sup>7</sup> In fact, a closer inspection of this definition reveals that the "feminine" elements listed here perfectly align themselves with the womanist categories in the previous lexical stratum: "Loves love" is analogous to "loves other women" and "sometimes loves other men"; music, dance, and food are integral parts of "women's culture"; "moon," "Spirit," and "roundness," traditionally used to conceptualize and symbolize the feminine, are analogous to other feminine traits, such as "women's emotional flexibility" and "women's strength"; "Loves struggle"<sup>8</sup> is the active commitment to the "survival and wholeness of

entire people," or the "universalist" aspect of "the Folk"; and the self-esteem which is requisite for "Loves herself" translates in womanist actions as "capable," "in charge," "serious." In citing the virtue of self-love, Walker reminds us of the maternal quality inherent in womanist values, since the commitment to African-American children's self-esteem has traditionally been the responsibility of their mothers. Barbara Christian notes that

an Afro-American child's sense of self-concept and security can hardly be derived from Anglo-American society. A positive sense of self-concept must come from his or her own community, natal family, ultimately from the mother. (Black Feminist Criticism 220)

Walker makes evident the psychological hardship caused by the loss of Celie's mother in The Color Purple, and Celie's subsequent challenge to "love herself" becomes a crucial precondition for viable social relations within the extended family as well as within the larger community.

All the semantic elements nested in Walker's idea of "womanist" signify back to their originary maternal usage. Therefore, Walker's call for justice and her insistence on self-esteem for people of color celebrates maternal strength through the qualifier "Regardless," which paradoxically dismisses qualification (i.e. despite any cost or threat) or compromise. The etymological flow of Walker's definition gradually progresses from a realist to a more figurative description, concluding with an analogy which could serve as a fitting prelude to The Color Purple: "Womanist is to

feminist as purple is to lavender" (xii). This contrast of hues in Walker's definition is consonant with her political intention to demonstrate the crucial difference between the terms "womanist" and "feminist": according to the semantic analogy she constructs, an exclusively white, bourgeois feminism literally pales in comparison to the more wide-ranging, nonexclusive womanist concerns represented by the rich and undiluted color purple. According to the semantic filiations of "womanist" which Walker has constructed from mother-daughter relations, her novel's title The Color Purple evokes these same maternal and womanist ideas.

Just as Walker expands a feminist linguistic space to accommodate her maternal relations, including the relationships among all women of color, she also recasts old genres and effects narrative innovations to delineate a "womanist" or maternal culture in The Color Purple. Different critical readers of this novel have noticed Walker's dependence on the traditional slave narrative, the epistolary novel, and her subversive use of the conventions of realism, Shakespearean romance, and the sentimental tradition.<sup>9</sup> But in establishing the commonality of mothering among her female characters, Walker's innovative manipulation of genres and narrative styles appropriately serves her more central concern of situating the maternal as a critical site for interrogating oppressive patriarchal and racist practices as she introduces "womanist" alternatives



in their place. While The Color Purple has been celebrated for its utopian conclusion of shared parenting as well as condemned for its failure to radicalize the consciousness of oppressed peoples, Walker does not simply deconstruct exploitative gender roles, nor does she deny responsibility for social change.<sup>10</sup> Instead, this novel can be read as Walker's project for examining the ways in which womanist values contribute to the revision of old cultural assumptions that delegitimize black women and explore how nonexclusive "womanist" alternatives provide a vision of social equity among genders.

Readers of The Color Purple must acknowledge Walker's concern with how the constraints of the American institution of slavery affected the historical transmission of African American women's creativity to successive generations of black women. Keeping this concern in mind, I consider how the text of The Color Purple represents "womanist" culture through Walker's textual embedding of literary, biological, and other maternal ancestors in her novel as a device to thwart the historical tendency that would impose anonymity on black women despite their creativity. Furthermore, Walker's recreation of a maternal ancestry in her novel includes characters based on actual female relations who have participated directly and indirectly in its composition, so that both present and historical female relations are joined as maternal co-creators in the process

of producing The Color Purple. By delineating a "textual" matriliney for her novel and aligning its women characters as subjects within a range of maternal identities, Walker establishes three critical discourses on maternity from which to challenge and revise various forms of institutionalized sexist and racist oppression: First, Walker questions and redefines the place of the mother within the African-American patriarchal family; next, she reconceptualizes a Judeo-Christian patriarchal God according to a maternal image; finally, she revises women's literary history to accomodate African-American women writers.

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the mother's subjectivity as both a "site of repression" and a "site of resistance" in The Color Purple.<sup>11</sup> In Walker's novel, African-American women who are mothers experience conflict through their double marginalization as members of a predominantly white and racist society which exacerbates their oppression under patriarchy. Each woman in The Color Purple exists in relative isolation within the patriarchal family, and her divided attention between the demands of a husband (or a father) and the needs of her children forces her to inhabit a space of conflict which often results in her punishment by the father/husband. The added social constraint of living in a racially segregated community compounds the African-American mother's burden in The Color Purple, and the portrayal of the mother in Walker's novel

endorses Zora Neale Hurston's view that the African-American woman has historically been treated as "the mule of the world."<sup>12</sup> From these conflicting positions, black women in Walker's novel articulate their oppression and voice their dissent against forms of patriarchal and racist tyranny which would subjugate them, and in the process, they often reject or revise former relationships made under the compulsion of patriarchal and racist strictures. In foregrounding maternal subjectivities in her novel, Walker creates a prose fiction conforming to her definition of womanist, not only by representing African-American women's dependence on and support for each other but also through their commitment to self-esteem and their insistence on overcoming obstacles which would deny them a meaningful role in the creation of their culture. As traditionally domestic and therefore maternal forms of artistic production, women's activities such as sewing and quilting become crucial to the formation of women's culture in The Color Purple.

Just as Walker revises the notion of the patriarchal family from a maternal perspective and criticizes racial oppression, she similarly challenges patriarchal and racist values as they are transmitted through the practices of institutional religion. By reevaluating conventional notions of God influenced by Shug's womanist "theology," Celie conceptualizes a maternal God that does not conform to masculine stereotypes. Furthermore, Nettie unwittingly

reinforces Shug's ideas of God through her correspondence with Celie. When Nettie writes to Celie of African etiological myths, she provides Celie with revised versions of Judeo-Christian Biblical accounts which allow Celie to image a maternal God and to participate in the formulation of a womanist interpretation of history.

As she establishes womanist social relations in The Color Purple, Walker cancels the mother's unquestioning primary allegiance to the father of her children and frees her to create a network of supportive adult relations with other women who are mothers. In reconceptualizing God according to a womanist culture, Walker models Celie's revised relationship to God on the mother-child bond which frees black women from the humiliating and contradictory affiliation with God as a white male Father. Walker's final revisionary act in Nettie's letters focusses on the drama surrounding the maternal identity of Adam and Olivia in order to address more explicitly the history of women's cultural production, specifically the exclusion of women of color from women's literary history, which represents predominantly white and middle-class feminist values. Nettie's correspondence from Africa becomes a pretext for Walker's revision of the superficial plot of Jane Eyre from a "womanist" perspective, challenging the violence of imperialism in Brontë's novel and therefore critically resituating a "cult text of feminism"<sup>13</sup> in the nineteenth-

century Anglo-American canon. Consequently, Walker rearranges the traditional feminist canon to accommodate her womanist novel as well as the writings of other black women, and so she pays tribute to those anonymous foremothers whose creativity would otherwise remain forgotten.

# I

## African-American Women and the Problem of Cultural Production

More than fifty years before the publication of The Color Purple, Virginia Woolf contemplated the problem of female creativity within a society which denied girls and women both an education and the material resources to produce books, music, or paintings. In A Room of One's Own, Woolf poses these questions: "Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?"<sup>14</sup> As Woolf muses about women's poor standing alongside acclaimed male writers in British literary history, she surmises that any female in the sixteenth century with Shakespeare's genius "would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared

and mocked at" (51). Woolf then offers her renowned solution for freeing the female imagination historically fettered by poverty and a hostile patriarchal culture: "five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door" (109).

Five decades later, Alice Walker offers a "womanist" revision of Woolf's argument in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens."<sup>15</sup> Similar to Woolf's hypothetical case of Shakespeare's sister, Walker is concerned about the marginalization, silencing, and disappearance from history of creative black women, "crazy Saints" akin to Woolf's "half witch, half wizard," whose "unused and unwanted talent drove them insane" (233). Walker's central problem in this essay is to present the difficulties and often the impossibility of reconstructing the historical transmission of black women's culture in the United States:

How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write? And freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist. (234)

Walker discovers that despite their severe social constraints and lack of material resources, black women such as poet Phyllis Wheatley "who owned not even herself" were able to produce art and transmit their creativity through such expressive forms as singing, quilting, floriculture, and storytelling.<sup>16</sup> In fact, many of the creative African-American women Walker acknowledges as maternal

ancestors managed to create something out of nothing: having no income or property, completely forbidden to read or write, having no access to a room of their own, and powerless as slaves to claim the right of their own bodies, "our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not, anonymously handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see" (240).<sup>17</sup> Walker aptly chooses a botanical metaphor for the transmission of women's creativity: a seed that will blossom in a future generation. Through the use of this trope, Walker recognizes and celebrates her own mother's genius for gardening as an authentic form of artistic creativity. By eventually declaring her mother's talent with flowers as a form of artistic production, Walker begins to acknowledge and reconstruct her own creative inheritance from her foremothers.

Understanding the severity of the constraints upon her black maternal ancestry under the American institution of slavery (especially when compared to the relative oppression of British and European women of Woolf's historical account), Walker controverts Woolf's basic requirements for women's creativity.<sup>18</sup> By demonstrating how dispossessed African-American women created art from refuse media (e.g. scraps of fabric for quilting) or from a collective memory (singing, story-telling), Walker does not romanticize their oppression but rather honors her foremothers by rescuing

them from anonymity and by invoking their memory, especially that of her own mother whose storytelling and gardening she credits as a chief source of inspiration to her writing:

Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories--like her life--must be recorded. (240)

Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms. . . . Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. (241-42)

In the first of these two passages, Walker testifies that her mother's storytelling provides her not only with content for her writing but also with the impulse or creative drive which she terms an "urgency" to record these inherited stories. The second passage is a more moving testimonial in that her mother's gift to create stunning flower gardens mediates the child's experience of material deprivation as "through a screen of blooms," a metaphor that transposes her mother's artistry into the daughter's own literary medium and which records the matrilineal transmission of that creativity for posterity.

"In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" can therefore be read not only as Walker's tribute to her maternal ancestry but also as a prologue to The Color Purple, which fulfills the essay's mandate to African-American women artists: "we



must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know" (237). Diane F. Sadoff states that for black women authors, "the historical burden of black matrifocality and motherhood--slavery, sexual exploitation, forced loss of children, and economic marginality--also creates the special 'duty,' as Walker defines it, of black literary matriliney."<sup>19</sup> In her writing, Walker figuratively recreates those mothers and grandmothers whose often anonymous but "living creativity" she acknowledges in her essay. For example, Walker has more than once acknowledged her debt as an author to her literary foremother Zora Neale Hurston, who not only died in poverty but who had little reputation as a writer and scholar for years after her death.<sup>20</sup> In her essay "Looking for Zora," Walker even establishes a fictive biological tie to Hurston in order to expedite her search for her foremother's grave site:

By this time I am, of course, completely into being Zora's niece, and the lie comes with perfect naturalness to my lips. Besides, as far as I'm concerned, she is my aunt--and that of all black people as well [her emphasis]. (102)

First acknowledged as "the lie," the impossible biological relation Walker establishes between herself and Hurston becomes a maternal bond between Hurston and the entire African-American community since the impact of Hurston's Mules and Men, according to Walker, gives back to black

people an original identity as "descendants of an inventive, joyous, courageous, and outrageous people; loving drama, appreciating wit, and, most of all, relishing the pleasure of each other's loquacious and bodacious company" [her emphasis].<sup>21</sup> In describing Hurston's legacy to all black people, Walker articulates the same "womanish" traits and maternal values that comprise her definition of "womanist" behavior and aesthetics.

As she acknowledges her indebtedness to Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Walker underscores the fact that "there is no book more important to me than this one" ("Zora Neale Hurston," 86). Henry Louis Gates explores Hurston's literary influence on Walker through an intertextual comparison of Hurston's novel with The Color Purple.<sup>22</sup> Calling attention to Walker's many "thematic echoes" of Their Eyes Were Watching God in her novel, Gates also argues that Hurston is recreated in the representation of Shug Avery, noting the affinity of Shug's description with a photo of Hurston which Walker describes in her essay "Zora Neale Hurston."<sup>23</sup> More importantly, Gates insists that by parodying the free indirect discourse of Hurston's narrator, "Walker has turned to a black antecedent text to claim literary ancestry, or motherhood, not only for content, but for structure" (163).<sup>24</sup>

Since Walker's definition of womanist originates within the context of mother-child relations, all females (all

girls and women of color, both biological and non-biological, either historical or contemporary) enjoy womanist relations which are at the same time sororal and maternal. By including Hurston in her maternal relations as both fictional "Aunt" and literary foremother, Walker begins to construct a matrilineal tradition in her fiction which transcends the limits of biological relations and the constraints of patriarchal and racist histories. Although Hurston is recognized as the model for Shug in The Color Purple, Gates learns that all of the other women in Walker's novel have roots in her "maternal" ancestry as well, both family members or other women from her childhood community: for example, Albert's sisters Kate and Carrie in the novel are named after Walker's paternal grandmother and aunt respectively; Annie Julia's depiction is based on events in her grandmother Kate's life; Walker's step-grandmother Rachel is recreated as Celie.<sup>25</sup>

Molly Hite, like Gates, also reads this novel as a matrilineal text, noting that Walker's elision of biological and literary motherhood in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" is consonant with her refusal to separate motherhood from "other, conventionally contrary, female functions" in the The Color Purple.<sup>26</sup> According to Hite, Walker's vision of maternal relations in her texts (in both her essays and her fiction) does not necessarily create

clear distinctions between the mother's influence and the daughter's creation:

This collaborative model of maternal influence suggests a subversively extended family romance, in which the mother as co-creator is simultaneously parent of the writer and her lover or spouse. Most disruptively for the absolute status of all these role definitions, she may even become the daughter of her own daughter. DuPlessis has suggested that in fulfilling or completing her biological mother's work, the twentieth-century woman writer is inclined to dramatize her mother's situation, re-creating her mother as a character and revising her destiny by reinscribing it in the fiction. Alice Walker, who gave birth to her step-grandmother when she created Celie, also uses The Color Purple to revise her relation to the woman she has elsewhere called her foremother. (272)

Walker's embedding of mothers and grandmothers in her novel allows the maternal subject to become the vehicle for revising the social relations within and beyond the patriarchal family according to "womanist" values or what Hite refers to as "a female-defined value community" (262-63).

But Walker's need to remember her maternal relations and the cultural heritage they represent by reconstructing them within her fiction includes such contemporary female relations as her sister Ruth and her daughter Rebecca. In her account of "Writing The Color Purple," Walker describes a process of composition whereby contemporary relations between women produce a text.<sup>27</sup> In this essay Walker emphasizes crucial moments in her relationships with her sister Ruth and daughter Rebecca who become inscribed in the

formative history of the novel, linking them to the black maternal ancestry of Walker's past which is represented by Kate and Rachel. First, Walker relates the now celebrated anecdote which she claims generated the idea for this novel: it would be "an historical novel" beginning "not with the taking of lands, or the births, battles, and deaths of Great Men" but with her sister Ruth's gossiping about "a lover's triangle" in which "The Wife asked The Other Woman for a pair of her drawers" (355). While the literal story Ruth shares with her sister is transformed into Celie's maternal care for Shug in Walker's novel, this anecdote nevertheless becomes an important commentary on Walker's view of history. In declaring her intention to write an historical novel, Walker humorously contrasts the "epochal" events that have traditionally grounded the narrativizing of patriarchal history with the stories and anecdotes that circulate among women, passed on from mother to daughter and from sister to sister, and that provide historical continuity between generations of women.

After her sister provided this inspirational "germ" for her story, Walker continued to plan the novel over the next two years. In her attempt to find the right location for an uninterrupted writing of her book, Walker moved from New York to San Francisco but finally settled for a remote spot in northern California which she found reminiscent of her home in rural Eatonton, Georgia. During the course of these

geographical relocations, Walker claims that her characters began gestating, "were trying to form (or, as I invariably thought of it, trying to contact me, to speak through me)" (356).<sup>28</sup> I use the term "gestation" because throughout her account of writing The Color Purple, Walker often describes her creative process as a writer in metaphors of conception, gestation, birth, and nurturing.<sup>29</sup> Participating in what Hite has termed "a subversively extended family romance," Walker and her sister Ruth become "co-creators" of The Color Purple, and the literary parenthood of the two sisters begins with Ruth's contribution of the "germ" of the novel.<sup>30</sup>

As Walker develops the metaphor, she describes herself in an intimate relationship with her evolving characters, humorously romanticizing and mimicking an expectant mother who tends patiently to the formative process of her children which have not yet "come out" but who nevertheless hears their emerging voices. Before her move to northern California where her serious writing of the novel began, Walker reconstructs these "unborn" characters as they voice their negative opinion of city life in San Francisco, approximating the displeasure of complaining children:

They also didn't like seeing buses, cars, or other people whenever they attempted to look out. "Us don't want to be seeing none of this," they said. "It make us can't think."

That was when I knew for sure these were country people. (356)

Describing her search for her characters' voices, Walker playfully mimics the mildly exasperated tone of a mother confronting her uncooperative dependents:

As long as there was any question about whether I could support them in the fashion they desired (basically undisturbed silence) they declined to come out. Eventually we found a place in northern California we could afford and that my characters liked. (357)

Up to this point, her characters' recalcitrance is expressed in a refusal to be born or to "come out." This rural setting "chosen" by her characters finally allows them to "come out" and embody the voices Walker has been coaxing forth for the past two years: "Seeing the sheep, the cattle, the goats, smelling the apples and the hay, one of my characters, Celie, began, haltingly, to speak" (357).

Walker's necessity of finding the most conducive location to write her novel becomes a projection of her characters who speak in the author's imagination before they "embody" their voices as fully delineated persons. This process mirrors Celie's own development in the novel when her decision to leave Albert's house allows her to finally speak her mind: "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation" (181).<sup>31</sup> Celie's literal "coming out" is a metaphoric rebirth which is made possible by finding the right location (Shug's house) to pursue her creative work as a designer and seamstress of pants.

In another metaphor of gestation and birth, Walker not only describes herself as the mediator of her characters' arrival into the world, but she also establishes a maternal bond with them as well:

Celie and Shug and Albert were getting to know each other, coming to trust my determination to serve their entry (sometimes I felt re-entry) into the world to the best of my ability, and what is more--and felt so wonderful--we began to love one another. (358)

As her characters become more familiar and she begins to fit their stories together, Walker describes her growing familiarity with the people of her novel in a rhetoric of ecstasy: "They were, of course, at the end of their story but were telling it to me from the beginning. . . . The days passed in a blaze of happiness" (359).

At this point in the composition of her novel, Walker seems ready to begin writing her story. However, the formation of her characters remains tentative when Walker's daughter Rebecca planned to live with her mother for two years. Despite her initial doubt about her ability to write a novel while coping with the additional responsibility of her daughter, Walker nevertheless firmly locates Rebecca's arrival as the point when her serious progress on her novel began:

My daughter arrived. Smart, cheerful, at school most of the day, but quick with tea and sympathy on her return. My characters adored her. They saw she spoke her mind in no uncertain terms and would fight back when attacked. When she came home from school one day with bruises but said, You should see the other guy, Celie



(raped by her stepfather as a child and somewhat fearful of life) began to reappraise her own condition. Rebecca gave her courage (which she always gives me)--and Celie grew to like her so much she would wait until three-thirty to visit me. So, just when Rebecca would arrive home needing her mother and a hug, there'd be Celie, trying to give her both. Fortunately I was able to bring Celie's own children back to her (a unique power of novelists), though it took thirty years and a good bit of foreign travel. But this proved to be the largest single problem in writing the exact novel I wanted to write between about ten-thirty and three. (359-60)<sup>32</sup>

Despite the practical constraints of writing only during her daughter's school hours, Walker nevertheless situates her composition of The Color Purple in the context of her maternal relationship to Rebecca. In Walker's account, Celie will not come forth until Rebecca arrives from school, and the formation of Celie, represented as Celie's self-reappraisal, is influenced by Walker's interaction with her daughter after school. The "mediation" of Celie between Walker and her daughter marks a point of creative tension between Walker's identities as artist and mother into a productive union which becomes a precondition for writing. According to Walker's description, her reunion with Rebecca and their subsequent union in the process of composing The Color Purple become coincidental with the reunion of Celie and her children.

In this account, Walker articulates the structural problem of reuniting a mother and her children in her novel from the standpoint of the artist who is also bound by the practical and material constraints of parenting; therefore,

Walker's concerns both as artist and mother become enmeshed in the same narrative. Just as Walker praises Buchi Emecheta's integration of her role as a professional writer "into the cultural concept of mother/worker that she retains from Ibo society," Walker's account of writing the Color Purple similarly "causes a rethinking of traditional masculinist ideas about how art is produced in the West."<sup>33</sup>

At the conclusion of her account of writing her novel, Walker states that she completed the entire composition in less time than she had imagined she would need:

I had planned to give myself five years to write The Color Purple (teaching, speaking, or selling apples, as I ran out of money). But, on the very day my daughter left for camp, less than a year after I started writing, I wrote the last page. (360)

In this passage, Walker maintains Rebecca's centrality to her process of writing The Color Purple, even at its conclusion when she comments that Rebecca's departure and the completion of the novel "was like losing everybody I loved at once" (360). Here, mother and daughter are co-creators just as the process and product of writing become synonymous; as Walker bids farewell to Rebecca, "everyone surged forth on the last page to say good-bye" (360). In the same sentence in which she describes Rebecca's departure, Walker also bids farewell to her individual characters by name as though they too are departing children: "Celie, Shug, Nettie, and Albert. Mary Agnes,

Harpo, and Sofia. Eleanor Jane. Adam and Tashi Omatongu. Olivia" (360).

The sentimental yet celebratory tone of "Writing The Color Purple" lies in Walker's successful resolution of the conflicts of the artist-mother articulated in a previous essay "One Child of One's Own."<sup>34</sup> In "One Child of One's Own," Walker rejects the traditional wisdom that equates the successful creativity of women with childlessness, and in repudiating such "wisdom" Walker discovers that Rebecca "was in fact the very least of her obstacles in her chosen work" (371). In one of her most important critiques of a white, middle-class feminism which is unconscious of its racist and patriarchal assumptions, Walker concludes that

In any case, it is not my child who tells me: I have no femaleness white women must affirm. Not my child who says: I have no rights black men must respect.

It is not my child who has purged my face from history and herstory and left mystory just that, a mystery. (382)

Condemning a political and social system that would deny black women on the basis of their race and sex the same privileges it bestows on other women, Walker finds an ally in her daughter within a society that would have women artists believe that their children are their enemies. In "defending a plan of life that encourages one child of one's own," Walker refutes a tradition that suggests a necessary conflict between mothering and the production of art (362). By contemplating the birth and nurturing of a child as a

textual experience, that is, as a "meaningful--some might say necessary--digression within the work(s)," Walker humorously but necessarily reserves a place for the child within the realm of African-American women's creativity (362).

Throughout this essay, Walker redefines her maternal relationship with Rebecca and creates a womanist bond between mother and daughter, no longer considering her only as a biological child but more as her "friend," "sister," and thus co-creator (382). In rethinking traditional wisdom that would place her daughter as an obstacle to her identity as a writer, Walker celebrates African-American women's shared roles in the intergenerational transmission and production of culture. Finally, Walker concludes "One Child of One's Own" with a tribute to her daughter which situates her own literary career in contrast to an historical tradition of both white and black women writers who were childless:

We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but sisters really, against whatever denies us all that we are.

For a long time I had this sign, which I constructed myself, out of false glitter, over my desk:

Dear Alice,  
Virginia Woolf had madness;  
George Eliot had ostracism,  
somebody else's husband,  
and did not dare to use  
her own name.  
Jane Austen had privacy  
and no love life.  
The Brönte sisters never went anywhere  
and died young

and dependent on their father.  
Zora Hurston (ah!) had no money  
and poor health.

You have Rebecca--who is  
much more delightful  
and less distracting  
than any of the calamities  
above. (382-83)

Consonant with the focus of her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker's poem inscribes herself as both author and mother, Zora Neale Hurston as one of her literary foremothers, and Walker's daughter Rebecca as instrumental in producing a literary text within a tradition that has previously ignored black women writers. Here, Walker depends on Rebecca's presence in her writing and credits the interaction with her daughter for her success in composing of The Color Purple, underscoring Rebecca's necessary part in the process of transmitting African-American women's culture.<sup>35</sup>

## II

### The Maternal as Site of Repression and Site of Resistance

Readers often view The Color Purple as a celebration of maternal alliance or "othermothering" whereby women cooperate in rearing and nurturing each other's children in the face of patriarchal oppression.<sup>36</sup> However, this emphasis may tend to romanticize African-American maternal

relations by ignoring the disproportionate burdens of childrearing which accrue to black women because of bias against their race as well as their gender.<sup>37</sup> The question of who will care for children when African-American mothers face overwhelming hardship or death as a result of patriarchal and racist forms of oppression consistently recurs in the novel.<sup>38</sup> For example, Alfonso rapes Celie after her mother becomes ill, forcing Celie to become both "mother" to her siblings and "wife" to her stepfather. The illness of Celie's mother, both psychological and physical, is a direct result of the violence of racism which is responsible for the lynching of Celie's father. Later, Celie rears Annie Julia's children after their mother's murder, but only after Albert bargains with Alfonso for possession of his daughter. Albert's acquisition of Celie as a mother surrogate is merely a commercial transaction with Alfonso, representing the patriarchal exchange of women. Mary Agnès and Sofia's sisters care for Sofia's children while she is incarcerated for twelve years by a racist juridical system, and Sofia's subsequently enforced maternal role as a "mammy" within the mayor's family is a punitive measure sanctioned by a racially divided society.<sup>39</sup> Shug's children are reared by her mother when Shug is forced from her parents' home because she does not marry Albert.

In other cases in the novel, mothers are forced to separate from their biological children because the ideology of the patriarchal family insists that a woman and her children are a man's transferable property, an assumption that is often complicated by racist power relations in the novel. In the case of Corrine and Samuel, who take in the homeless Nettie to help tutor Celie's children whom they have adopted, their parenting of Nettie (as well as Nettie's parenting of Adam and Olivia) is the indirect result of Alfonso's and Albert's sexual violence against Celie and Nettie. An underlying feature of each case of shared maternal responsibility in The Color Purple is the compulsion of women to nurture and rear children as a result of their oppression by a patriarchal society and the corollary social violence of racism, both which define the maternal subject as a replaceable domestic functionary while denying or deemphasizing her maternal relationship with her own children.

Although some readers view the Color Purple as a utopian vision whereby men begin to share women's maternal responsibilities, the men in the novel seem only to wear down within their patriarchal roles more than becoming zealous converts to the anti-patriarchal efforts of women characters, adding a deterministic cast to The Color Purple which does not magically disappear with the "utopian" conclusion of the text. Here, I find it important to

address bell hooks's charge that the conclusion of The Color Purple represents "a fantasy of change without effort" in that "struggle--the arduous and painful process by which the oppressed work for liberation--has no place."<sup>40</sup> While most readers would probably agree that The Color Purple is neither a simple didactic novel nor a pragmatic handbook for social reform, I argue that one of its functions is to present a critical revisioning of social possibilities for women without the double constraint of patriarchy and racism. Distinctively postmodern in its parodic use of many genres--the epistolary novel, the personal confession and spiritual autobiography, the slave narrative, as well as the inclusion of biographical elements from the lives of some of Walker's maternal ancestors--the novel's incorporation of many narrative forms demonstrates the inappropriateness of traditional genres in representing the creative struggles of Walker's African and African-American maternal ancestry and how "womanist" (as opposed to feminist) culture revises patriarchal values.<sup>41</sup> Read in light of Walker's "search for her mother's garden," the creation of Celie is a testimony to how one oppressed African-American woman struggles to make something out of nothing, just as Walker's essay recreates the artistic endeavors of her black maternal ancestry whose cultural production from minimal media has been ignored, erased, and suppressed by an historical tradition that denies the contributions of African-American



women. Walker's concern for the maternal subject in The Color Purple focuses on the obstacles which deny black women a place in history and offers an alternative social vision whereby the material constraints imposed by gender and racial oppression are exposed and begin to break down.<sup>42</sup>

The most obvious recurring pattern of maternal experience in The Color Purple is the forced separation of the mother from her children. The often violent distancing between mothers and children occurs when the power relations supporting patriarchal dominance, both within the family and the community, undermine the mother's autonomy and ultimately silence her. And as Lauren Berlant observes, "gender difference takes on the pressure of justifying and representing racial oppression" in The Color Purple (840).<sup>43</sup> For example, Celie's and Nettie's mother is brutally silenced by the shock of her first husband's lynching by a mob of white men who see his business success as a threat. Here, as in other episodes in the novel, the collusion of racism with white patriarchal power diminishes the autonomy of the black male while further extending his undeserved suffering to black women and children.<sup>44</sup> After the lynching of their father, both Celie and Nettie become emotionally separated from their mother as her psychological abuse progresses into physical illness and eventual madness during her marriage to Alfonso. While Alfonso's abuse of power seems to occupy a most prominent position in Celie's

and Nettie's early life, the lynching of their father remains the insidious fact that cripples Celie's mother. Only then does Alfonso take advantage of his wife's vulnerability to make his incestuous move against Celie.

After the birth of her last child, Celie's mother desperately resists Alfonso's sexual advances with a plea which Celie records in her first letter: "Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm half dead, an all of these children" (11). Alfonso then transfers his sexual demands to Celie, but he insures her silence by warning that her revelation of his repeated rapes would "kill your mammy" (11). Burdened with the fear of her mother's imminent death, Celie is further distanced from her mother since she is forced to lie about the paternity of her children. As Lindsey Tucker has observed, Celie's mother dies in the attempt "to fit the patriarchal script of the submissive wife with no voice and no power."<sup>45</sup> However, Celie does not assume the final responsibility for her mother's death since she indirectly imposes the blame on Alfonso: "Trying to believe his story killed her" (15). Nevertheless, Alfonso's exercise of patriarchal dominance as male family head extends beyond the immediate control of his wife and daughters to alter Celie's relationship with her two children.

As Celie is violently separated from her mother who dies "screaming and cussing," she is also abruptly separated

from her own infants (12). Alfonso removes both children shortly after their births, leaving Celie with the impression that he has murdered them. To cover any evidence of his rape of Celie, Alfonso hands her over to Albert, a widower who seeks a wife to manage his four children, and her stepfather maintains Celie's silence by warning Albert not to listen to her because "she tell lies" (18). The sexual abuse which Alfonso has practiced on both Celie and her mother is repeated when he takes a new wife. According to Celie, this wife lives in a constant stupor from Alfonso's sexual battering: "He be on her all the time. She walk round like she don't know what hit her" (14). Through his new wife, Alfonso virtually reenacts his incestuous relationship with Celie who notices "she be my age but they married" (14). When Alfonso's new wife becomes pregnant, Alfonso continues his sexual assault on Celie "while our new mammy sick" (17). More importantly, Celie's role as domestic drudge and sexual partner for Albert is identical to the role of Alfonso's new wife in that both women are compelled to begin a maternal relationship caring for children who are hostile or at least indifferent to them.

The sexual and racial violence which victimizes Celie's mother and ultimately separates her from her children becomes reproduced not only in Celie's life but in the lives of other women in the novel who are mothers. For example, Albert's first wife, Annie Julia, is killed by her lover in

front of her child Harpo, whose grief over her death continues to haunt him as an adult. Celie represents the traumatic account of her death which Harpo recalls from his nightmare:

Harpo be trouble with nightmares. He see his mama running cross the pasture trying to git home. Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, the man they say her boyfriend, catch up with her. She got Harpo by the hand. They both running and running. He grab hold of her shoulder, say, You can't quit me now. You mine. She say, No I ain't. My place is with my children. He say, Whore, you ain't got no place. He shoot her in the stomach. She fall down. The man run. Harpo grab her in his arms, put her head in his lap.

He start to call, Mama, Mama. It wake me up. The other children, too. They cry like they mama just die. Harpo come to, shaking. (36)

According to Celie's account, Annie Julia's supposed "lover" denies her autonomy by claiming her as his property and refusing to acknowledge her subjectivity or "place" in her family and community. Annie Julia's actual history in the novel is conjectural since Celie reconstructs the details of her past through the painful memories of Harpo's childhood. There is no further evidence in the text that Annie Julia was actually having an affair with "the man they say her boyfriend" who murders her because she rejects him, not in favor of her husband but in privileging her maternal relationship with her children. Through his actions, Annie Julia is violently parted from her children and denied a posthumous "place" in the social history of the community as a result of her murder.

Annie Julia's death, similar to the violence preceding the death of Celie's mother, permanently scars her children, especially Harpo. Harpo is the unnamed "oldest boy" who terrorizes Celie from her first day of married life:

I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mama died in his arms and he don't want to hear nothing bout no new one. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts. His daddy say Don't do that! But that's all he say. (21)

Albert's decision not to seriously protect Celie explains Harpo's early rejection of Celie as well as his later attempts to dominate Sofia. Albert views Celie as a constant threat to his paternal authority within the family, and his justification of periodically beating her is that "she stubborn" and "All women good for" (30). Albert's violence reinforces an indomitable hierarchy privileging the father's dominance over the mother and discourages Celie from feeling maternal affection for Albert's children: "Everybody say how good I is to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ children. I be good to them. But I don't feel nothing for them. . . . Anyhow, they don't love me neither, no matter how good I is" (37).

Although Harpo is torn by the grief over his mother's murder, he nevertheless reproduces Albert's patriarchal practices in his own marriage. By exerting his "privilege" to beat his wife, Harpo eventually drives Sofia and her children from their home. Later when Sofia challenges the

institutions of patriarchy and racism represented by the mayor and his wife, she is beaten, imprisoned, and separated from her children for twelve years; and during her exile she is coerced into a hostile maternal relationship with the mayor's children as their "mammy." The maternal experiences of Celie, Sofia, Annie Julia, Celie's mother, and Alfonso's new wife are typical of what Christine Froula calls "the patriarchal marriage plot that sanctions violence against women" (639).<sup>46</sup>

Shug's maternal experience can be described in similar terms since paternity becomes the crucial issue which separates her from her three children. As a result of her sexual relationship with Albert, she is finally driven out of her mother's house and separated from her children because she does not marry him. Shug never endorses marriage as a viable solution to end the conflict between her sexual desire for Albert and her maternal relationship with her children: "I never really wanted Albert for a husband. But just to choose me, you know, cause nature had already done it" (117). Albert's father, doubtful of the paternity of Shug's children, refuses to sanction a possible marriage between Shug and his son over this "uncertainty." When Shug protests that she and Albert are in fact the children's biological parents, the father silences Shug by asking, "How us know?" (116). Albert's father also uses the issue of Shug's uncertain paternal ancestry to support his

dislike of her: "Nobody even sure exactly who her daddy is" (59). Through the misogyny of Albert's father, Walker not only represents the process by which residual power of patriarchy is maintained through the paternal line of inheritance but also demonstrates how the burden of proving a child's paternity becomes transposed to women. Through Shug's experience, Walker bluntly illustrates how the patriarchal institution of marriage punishes women within as well as outside its legal parameters.

The suppression of the mother through the violent exercise of patriarchal power not only separates her from her children but maintains her powerlessness by silencing her and distancing her from the larger supporting community of family and friends. Celie first comments on this isolation when she lives at home: "don't nobody come see us" (12). Similarly, Shug remarks that Annie Julia's family "forgot about her once she married" Albert (116). And when Albert's sisters visit and break the monotony of Celie's life, he rudely forces them packing when they suggest that Harpo offer Celie more help with the housework. In The Color Purple the maternal functions of bearing and rearing children force women to occupy positions of marginality, and consequently the mothers' subjectivities are marked by isolation, silence, weakness, and negation.

bell hooks has argued that Walker limits the activity of the mother to a structural function in The Color Purple

in order to establish supportive bonds among women outside the patriarchal family:

Since the mother is bonded with the father, supporting and protecting his interests, mothers and daughters within this fictive patriarchy suffer a wound of separation and abandonment; they have no context for unity. Mothers prove their allegiance to fathers by betraying daughters; it is only a vision of sisterhood that makes woman bonding possible. By eschewing the identity of Mother, black women in The Color Purple, like Shug and Sofia, rebelliously place themselves outside the context of patriarchal family norms, revisioning mothering so that it becomes a task any willing female can perform, irrespective of whether or not she has given birth. Displacing motherhood as central signifier for female being, and emphasizing sisterhood, Walker posits a relational basis for self-definition that valorizes and affirms female bonding. It is the recognition of self in the other, of unity, and not self in relationship to the production of children that enables women to connect with one another.<sup>47</sup>

For hooks, the specification "Mother," denoted by its capitalized spelling, is an ideological construct signifying women's submission through childbearing and childrearing to the paternal hierarchy within the nuclear family, including the mother's support of patriarchal dominance as it extends from the home into society. According to hooks' distinction, women who bond with men inside the patriarchal family limit and risk losing their identities within the narrow confines of maternal responsibility.

While sexual reproduction is emphatically rejected as foundational for establishing women's maternal identities in The Color Purple, Walker nevertheless foregrounds the adverse conditions under which African-American women have



produced and nurtured children, and these oppressive aspects of motherhood become central to reading the novel's gender politics. More importantly, and what hooks fails to underscore, is the fact that most female bonding in the story occurs as a result of events circumscribed by maternal activity, either through giving birth or through the nurturing and rearing of children. Thus, hooks's analysis does not admit the finely tuned dialectic between motherhood and sisterhood, between women who bond as "sisters" through their mother-daughter relations or through their nurturing of each other.<sup>48</sup>

For example, hooks's reading does not account for Celie's complex reaction when she discovers Olivia for the first time since Alfonso has given her child to Samuel and Corrine. The scene where both mothers meet in town certainly ratifies hook's sense of female bonding in that Celie befriends and comforts Corrine, her child's adoptive mother, who feels vulnerable on the street as she awaits Samuel's arrival. At the same time, however, Celie's sense of identity is irrevocably tied to her recognition of Olivia as her biological child, but the bond Celie establishes with Corrine does not represent what hooks refers to as the displacement of motherhood as a central signifier. In this scene, Celie's anguish at losing the child she has just recognized but cannot claim is painfully evident: "I think she mine. My heart say she mine. But I don't know she

mine" (22). The conflict of Celie's inability to prove her maternity of Olivia becomes represented as the gap between thinking and feeling her bond with her daughter and actually knowing it as a fact. When Corrine reveals to Celie that she calls the child "Olivia," the name Celie once embroidered in the infant's diapers, she supplies the missing evidence which confirms the fact that Celie is Olivia's mother.

Furthermore, hook's view of the mother's contradictory allegiance to the patriarchal family does not satisfactorily apply to Celie who has not betrayed her daughter but has instead been victimized by Alfonso's act of incest and his subsequent theft of her infant daughter. In fact, Celie's response in recognizing her child is not to hide Alfonso's abuse and protect his identity but to establish her own identity by painfully admitting the resemblance between Olivia and the child's parents: "I seen my baby girl. I knowed it was her. She look just like me and my daddy. Like more us then us is ourself" (22). Through Celie's recognition and affirmation of herself as Olivia's mother, Walker invokes the mother-daughter bond as a means through which future relations will be established between Corrine and Nettie that will later insure her sister's survival as well as her future contact with her children. Celie's next letter testifies to this desirable bond which she offers as a gift to help Nettie escape from Albert: "But I only got

one thing to give her, the name of Reverend Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. I tell her to ast for his wife" (26). In her desperation to save Nettie from Albert, Celie directs Nettie to another "sister" and surrogate mother. The triangular pattern of relations between these pairs of women--Celie and Nettie, Nettie and Corrine, and Celie and Corrine--complicates the network of existing maternal and sororal paired relations in the novel whose bonds often become indistinguishable from those of other pairs of women: Shug and Celie, Celie and Sofia, Sofia and Mary Agnes, Mary Agnes and Shug.<sup>49</sup>

The interaction between mothers and children and the relations between women in the novel continue to resist hooks's oversimplification that Walker repudiates identification through the mother's role in favor of sororal relations. In the case of Sofia, the revisioning of motherhood is not effected by Harpo's patriarchal insistence that she submit to his authority. In fact, Sofia summons her sisters in order to consolidate her relationship with her children. Sofia's actual separation from her children and her social "displacement" occurs because the patriarchal dominance of Harpo, which she feels free to reject, is formidably reproduced in the community's legal strictures that institutionalize racism, represented in her confrontation with the mayor and which Sofia alone cannot overcome. In Sofia's case as well as in Celie's, women who are mothers are more vulnerable to social displacement by

patriarchal authority which imposes contradictory demands on them. Celie experiences this double-bind when Alfonso keeps her from attending school after she becomes pregnant. When her teacher Miss Beasley discovers Celie is pregnant, she gives up trying to influence Alfonso to let Celie continue her education. As a teacher Miss Beasley represents the institutional authority in a patriarchal society that quickly censures adolescent women for promiscuity and views pregnancy as precluding other life choices. The double bind Celie faces is bearing unwarranted public contempt for being an unwed mother while remaining powerless to expose her father's guilt. If Miss Beasley suspects Alfonso of incest, her quiet submission is destructively complicitous with the patriarchal logic which intimidates women, especially incest victims, from exposing sexual abuse.

The fact of Celie's writing, however, defies the silence, isolation, and powerlessness imposed on her by Albert and Alfonso as she details their transgressions, censuring both husband and stepfather in her letters. The documentary aspect of Celie's narrative permits her to record Albert's abuses as well as to analyze other instances of her oppression, therefore breaking the patriarchal imposition of silence.<sup>50</sup> Through her act of writing letters, Celie also establishes an audience (God and Nettie) which relieves her isolation. Although Celie's writing is only one means she chooses to resist patriarchal violence

(among others, her lesbian alliance with Shug, her departure from Albert, her initiation of economic self-sufficiency, her refusal to reenter the heterosexual economy after Shug departs with Germaine), her writing is the only act in the novel which sustains her movement from complete domination under patriarchal authority to her final independence. In this respect, Celie's record of her oppression coincides with hooks's challenge to readers of contemporary culture to view marginality as more than just a "site of repression":

Understanding marginality as [a] position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people. If we only view the margin as sign, marking the condition of our pain and deprivation, then a certain hopelessness and despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk, there that one's mind is fully colonized, there that the freedom one longs for is lost. Truly the mind that resists colonization struggles for freedom of expression. That struggle may not even begin with the colonizer; it may begin within one's segregated colonized community and family. I want to note that I am not trying to romantically re-inscribe the notion of that space of marginality where the oppressed live apart from their oppressors as "pure." I want to say that these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance (342).<sup>51</sup>

In marking the site of repression as also one of resistance, hooks carefully avoids mystifying the space of marginality. To accomplish this, hooks relates her painful personal experience of growing up in a small segregated town in Kentucky where race relations, similar to those in The Color Purple, reinforce the marginality of the black women and men

whose commerce with white townspeople is permitted "as long as it was in a service capacity."<sup>52</sup> In the same essay, hooks also explains how local customs and laws ensure that black people return to and remain on the edge of society: "We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks; to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town" (341). According to hooks, this crossing back and forth from margin to center ironically provides a double vantage point from both inside and outside the dominant society, a perspective which the white townspeople could not possibly share. Viewing the power relations of a racially segregated town from both perspectives paradoxically provides a "privileged" position from which the marginalized subject can creatively resist oppression.

Walker's representation of women's oppression in The Color Purple accords with hooks's view of marginality in that Celie's narrative does not entirely focus on her "pain and deprivation" of autonomy, and Walker's tone is neither despairing nor nihilistic. In fact, Celie recognizes her maternal, domestic, and sexual oppression through her sequential representation of these events in her letter writing where she "struggles for freedom of expression" (Hooks 342). Similar to hooks's account, Celie's struggle does not begin with one adversary or explicit "colonizer"; instead, she indirectly exposes her oppression as the effect

of her colonization within a racially-segregated community and within a gender-segregated family. The movement of The Color Purple, then, is not from margin to center, but from an increasing awareness of the material conditions sustaining one's marginality which inevitably leads to a critique of the center. Celie's narrative becomes a vividly self-conscious testimony to the kind of social displacement through racial segregation which hooks personally experienced, and the burning of Celie's father's store and her father's subsequent lynching by a white mob dramatically record the violent enforcement of black marginality.

If African-Americans in The Color Purple are situated on the periphery of a town whose white inhabitants define the power relations of the entire locality, then black women in the novel can be said to be twice removed from the nexus of social, political, and economic relations dictated by racial segregation. Susan Willis equates the terms "black" and "underclass" in Walker's fiction as she examines women's (that is, the mother's) secondary position in this subclass: "Bound to the land and their husbands (or fathers), worn by toil in the fields and the demands of childbearing, these women are the underclass of the underclass" (40).<sup>53</sup> In The Color Purple, this double displacement of black women is most apparent in their role as mothers (either as childbearers, or nurturers and guardians of children, or both) since their male oppressors within the black community

often imitate and reproduce the violence inflicted on them by their white counterparts in the larger society. This double victimization of women and their children becomes evident in such cases as Albert's refusal to work the fields while forcing Celie and Harpo to do his share. By expecting the same obedience from Celie as he expects from Harpo, Albert situates Celie in the same position of powerlessness as his children; therefore, Celie often bears the brunt of Albert's anger: "he beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them" (30). Albert also forbids Celie any social life while he follows Shug from one singing engagement to another.

By keeping Celie confined to domestic and maternal responsibilities, Albert does not have to confront her humanity, especially her emotional and material needs. But even from within the narrow confines of her maternal and domestic roles within Albert's household, a situation of virtual powerlessness, Celie registers her resistance to her mistreatment as she cares for Albert's children. When Harpo suffers from nightmares of his mother's death, Celie deliberately separates her maternal acts of comforting and assuring Harpo as distinct from the possibility of parental love and emotional commitment to him by imaging their relationship as "wooden" or unfeeling:

Everybody say how good I is to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ children. I be good to them. But I don't feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. It more like patting another



piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferobe. Anyhow, they don't love me neither, no matter how good I is. (37)

The sequence of metaphors referring to wood and wooden objects transfers Celie's experience of objectification to Harpo as she distinguishes herself as the unfeeling yet "living tree" from the mere furniture which Harpo represents. The passage acquires intratextual significance since Celie repeats the same metaphor to describe her process of emotional hardening when Albert beats her: "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" (30). The figure of the living tree is obviously self-affirming in its repeated signification of difference from the dead wood she identifies with emotional vacuity. Therefore the tree becomes a trope for Celie's emotional existence within her writing as opposed to the nominal maternal responsibilities she rotely but faithfully carries out for Albert's children.

Celie's writing preserves her feeling while freeing her from the constraints of guilt which she might otherwise face in the contradictory service of nurturing dependent children while denying them sympathetic engagement. In fact, Walker never represents Harpo's siblings beyond the early reference to Celie's wedding day when she untangles the little girls' knotted hair (21). After this scene, Harpo's brother and two sisters appear on the periphery of the narrative when

they are represented as literally "peeking through the cracks" while Albert beats Celie; subsequently, they disappear from the text. Because she does not allow Albert's children to become central to her emotional life, Celie emphatically marginalizes them in her narrative. Just as her "goodness" to Albert's children is remarked by others in the text, her maternal responsibility for them is only presumed by others in the novel but never defines Celie as a woman in her own discourse. Similarly, Celie's recuperation of Harpo in her letters can be read predominantly as a strategy for presenting the effects of his patriarchal oppression of Sofia since Celie's letters never reconstruct an incident for the sake of Harpo alone.

Like Celie, other black women in The Color Purple are forced to submit to male authority, but the circumstances of their repression often develop into occasions for actively resisting the patriarchal and racist strategies that would keep them confined. As in Celie's case, this transformation of repression into resistance is often accomplished within the context of women's roles as childbearers and nurturers. A most obvious example is Shug's ignoring of her parents' disapproval when she continues to bear Albert's children without marrying him. Shug's mother tries to suppress Shug's sexuality and instill in her daughter a priority for maternal responsibility, but in doing so she only encourages Shug's desire for Albert:

One thing my mama hated me for was how much I love to fuck, she say. She never love to do nothing had anything to do with touching anybody, she say. I try to kiss her, she turn her mouth away. Say, Cut that out Lillie, she say. Lillie Shug's real name. She just so sweet they call her Shug.

My daddy love me to kiss and hug him, but she didn't like the looks of that. So when I met Albert, and once I got in his arms, nothing could get me out. It was good, too, she say. You know for me to have three babies by Albert and Albert weak as he is, it had to be good. (115)

Shug's sexual attraction for Albert, her love of freedom, and her desire to sing in public are higher priorities than socially legitimizing her bond with Albert through the legal apparatus of marriage. Although she is hurt when Albert's father rejects her and is stunned when Albert marries Annie Julia, Shug can later admit that "what was good tween us must have been nothing but bodies" (117).

Shug openly admits the limitations of marriage when she discovers Albert's abuse of Celie, and she paradoxically conveys her insight into Albert's character in terms of misrecognizing the man who once provoked her passion: "I don't know the Albert that don't dance, can't hardly laugh, never talk bout nothing, beat you and hid your sister Nettie's letters. Who he?" (117). Outside the institution of marriage, Shug's desire for Albert was unrestrained, and she often flaunted her sexual relation with him to diminish both Annie Julia and Celie. But when Shug begins to see Albert from Celie's perspective or from inside their marital relationship, she wonders how she could have alienated Annie

Julia: "Hell, say Shug. I liked her myself. Why I hurt her so?" (116-17). Shug's newly-formed alliance with Annie Julia and Celie indicates a reconsideration of an earlier disappointment in not marrying Albert. In fact, when she hears his tirades against Celie, she can confront Albert with this truth: "Good thing that I ain't your damn wife" (74). Just as Celie resists an emotional relationship with Albert's children, Shug abandons her maternal role to pursue her singing and to maintain an active sexuality, two vital aspects of her personality.

Sofia, like Celie and Shug, insists on self-preservation. But unlike Sofia, Celie initially perseveres by disengaging from confrontations with Albert: "I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (29). Whereas Celie's overt challenge of Albert gradually develops as her narrative progresses, Sofia's defiance is always evident. Her transgressions of patriarchal authority and her refusal to be bound by conventional codes of wifely submissiveness undermine Harpo at every turn. Unlike Shug, however, Sofia adamantly maintains her independence within the confines of maternal responsibility. As soon as Harpo's attempts at domination become intolerable, Sofia removes her children and returns to her sisters. Sofia resists a mindless compliance with Harpo's views of how she should think and act, and she easily discards covention when she opts for practical approaches to her daily tasks: she literally

"wears the pants" in the family against Harpo's objections when she performs her chores. Even when she is physically and psychologically worn down by her severe beating and prison sentence as a result of confronting the mayor and his wife, Sofia silently withdraws into a position of non-cooperation, a form of passive resistance. For example, when she is assigned to watch over the mayor's children at play, she allows the child Billy to injure himself while he is insulting her, and his mother detects Sofia's hostility: "Miss Millie come running. She scared to death of Sofia. Everytime she talk to her it like she expect the worst. She don't stand close to her either" (99).

Sofia spends twelve years living in a makeshift room underneath the mayor's house for the duration of her jail sentence, providing compulsory domestic and child care services for the mayor's family. Her marginalized living space provides the contradictory social perspective as both insider and outsider which hooks describes in that Sofia has access to the most intimate details of the mayor's family life and at the same time is permanently relegated to a storeroom outside the family's domicile. The family's segregation of Sofia provides them with the illusion of privacy, but the domestic arrangement they construct offers Sofia ample opportunity for social criticism:

Sofia would make a dog laugh, talking about those people she work for. They have the nerve to try to make us think slavery fell through because of us, say Sofia. Like us didn't have sense

enough to handle it. All the time breaking hoe handles and letting the mules loose in the wheat. But how anything they build can last a day is a wonder to me. They backward, she say. Clumsy, and unlucky. (100)

Sofia's poignant yet humorous commentary originates within the context of her domestic and maternal duties within the intimacy of the mayor's family. Sofia's servile presence in the center of the mayor's family preserves their belief in her loyalty and maternal devotion to their children. At the same time, they are blind to her peripheral existence underneath the house and in relation to her own children, whom she is allowed to visit only once a year. Sofia's marginalized life prevents the mayor, his wife, and children from detecting Sofia's resentment and censure of them. Her brooding hostility over the injustice done to her by the racist town officials is kept hidden underneath her placid external appearance: "Three years after she beat she out of the wash house, got her color and her weight back, look like her old self, just all time think bout killing somebody" (98).

However, Sofia's righteous anger does not remain focussed on destruction; rather she affirms herself in her position as a mother to her family in opposition to her enforced maternal role in the mayor's family. Long after her "sentence" is completed in the mayor's home, Sofia offers evidence of a constructive anger when she is visited by Eleanor Jane, the mayor's daughter whom she reared.

Accompanied by her infant son Reynolds Stanley, Eleanor Jane claims Sofia's past maternal relationship with her in order to provoke Sofia's admiration of her child. When Eleanor Jane encourages Sofia to express some sentiment for Reynolds Stanley, Sofia rejects her past relationship with Eleanor Jane, exposing her past maternal care for what it was in fact, enforced domestic servitude and racial exploitation:

I love children, say Sofia. But all the colored women that say they love yours is lying. They don't love Reynolds Stanley any more than I do. But if you so badly raise as to ast 'em, what you expect them to say? Some colored people so scared of whitefolks they claim to love the cotton gin. (233)

Sofia's bold declamation negates a compulsory maternal love and upholds her own right to give or deny affection.

This negation is consistent with Sofia's earlier resistance to Harpo's claim of his patriarchal right to beat her. Harpo's past coercion had destroyed Sofia's sexual attraction for her husband, and only when she sees Harpo nurturing Albert after Celie's departure does she regain her affection for him:

Well, one night I walked up to tell Harpo something--and the two of them was just laying there on the bed fast asleep. Harpo holding his daddy in his arms.

After that, I start to feel again for Harpo, Sofia say. And pretty soon us start to work on our new house. She laugh. (201)

Similar to caressing a sleepless infant or a sick child, Harpo performs a maternal gesture toward his father, arousing Sofia's sexual attraction. Sofia resumes her love

for Harpo because she witnesses for the first time his ability to love outside the constraints of paternal dominance.

On the other hand, Sofia finds she cannot possibly express love for Eleanor Jane's son because he will only learn to reproduce the racist and patriarchal assumptions of his father and grandfather which made her maternal "devotion" to their family compulsory. Sofia confronts Eleanor Jane with this explanation: "I got my own troubles, say Sofia, and when Reynolds Stanley grow up, he's gon be one of them" (234). Just as Celie remains uninvolved with Albert's children, Sofia withholds maternal affection from Eleanor Jane and Reynolds Stanley, an act which allows Sofia to regain her dignity and to preserve her emotional integrity. But Sofia's prediction about Reynolds Stanley's future represents more than a single act of resistance. By speculating about Reynolds Stanley's acculturation into a racist society, Sofia describes the seemingly inevitable perpetuation of patriarchal and racist practices which continues to marginalize women and separate mothers from their children in The Color Purple.

Sofia's vision of Reynolds Stanley's future should serve to temper facile utopian readings of The Color Purple. Insofar as Christine Froula's following analysis correctly emphasizes the breakdown of gender barriers throughout Walker's text, her analysis leads her to identify the care



of children as the focal point of utopian celebration among formerly adversarial gendered subjects:

Whereas, in the patriarchal societies analyzed by Levi-Strauss, the exchange of women forges bonds between men that support male culture, in Walker's creation story children are the miracle and mystery that bond all her characters to the world, each other and the future. (642)<sup>54</sup>

Froula's reading collapses hierarchies of authority pertaining to gender as well as race. I have tried to argue that Walker is more concerned with the plight of the mother in The Color Purple and consequently deemphasizes children themselves. Utopian readings such as Froula's disregard the difficult struggle of black women who resist the violence of patriarchal oppression within the context of racial segregation through different strategies such as the refusal of maternal feeling and the adamant withdrawal from the confines of marriage. By sidestepping the issue of racism which perpetuates black women's oppression and by focussing on men's and women's equal responsibility in childcare, Froula too easily dismisses the persistence of racist hierarchies that fuel the continued violence of gender oppression in the novel.<sup>55</sup> Sofia's confrontation with Eleanor Jane and Reynolds Stanley remind the reader that, from the standpoint of the white community, Sofia is expected to readily respond to the racist stereotype of "mammy" when she is summoned, a lasting mark of her "punishment" in servitude within the mayor's family.

While Eleanor Jane's decision to help Sofia in her care of Henrietta inverts the stereotypical and racist role of the black woman who is forced to provide maternal care for white children, Sofia maintains some skepticism about Eleanor Jane's motives and depth of commitment; and Harpo, after his supposed transformation from patriarch to housekeeper, continues to profess absolute faith in the persistence of white patriarchal dominance:

Well, say Harpo, I'm satisfied if her menfolks against her helping you, she gon quit. Let her quit, say Sofia. It not my salvation she working for. And if she don't learn she got to face judgment for herself, she won't even have live. (246)

Whereas Harpo's comment testifies against his conversion to a belief in an anti-patriarchal society, Sofia's statement affirms Eleanor Jane's need for independence from men and her right to autonomous rational judgment and ethical decision-making unimpeded by patriarchal values. In fact, Sofia's final words demonstrate that rather than presenting an irresponsible and ahistorical utopian vision, Walker's representation of maternal subjectivity foregrounds the oppressive patriarchal and racist hierarchies which African-American women must constantly resist in order to make themselves seen and heard in a world that denies their existence and represses their creative activity in American history.

In her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker cites the example of an anonymous African-American

quiltmaker whose exquisite needlework, enshrined in the Smithsonian Museum, represents the scores of nameless women whose contributions to African-American culture may never be acknowledged.<sup>56</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that many of Walker's disfranchised women of The Color Purple all share in common the creative activities of quilting and needlework. As Keith Byerman has noted, the activity of quilting in Walker's novel "functions as a way of creating female community in a world that represses female expression" (61).<sup>57</sup> In The Color Purple, however, quilting and sewing do not merely serve to establish bonds between women; for Walker, working with a needle becomes a signatory activity whereby women resist anonymity. When she discovers her daughter for the first time with Corrine, Celie is able to confirm Olivia's identity because the name "Olivia" which she once embroidered on the infant's diapers corresponds to the same name which Corrine continues to use for the adopted child. Later in Nettie's letters, Celie learns how Nettie depends on a scrap of fabric from Corrine's old dress, now incorporated into a quilt, to provoke Corrine's memory of her past encounter with Celie and to supply the proof of Celie's maternal relationship to Adam and Olivia. And while the cooperative quilting between Celie and Sophia becomes an essential step toward healing their differences, their finished project becomes a testimonial to how three formerly indifferent women discover

their collaborative identities among each other, no longer vying as competitors: Shug contributes scraps of her yellow dress which Celie incorporates into the quilt pattern; Sofia suggests that Celie's curtains, which she and Harpo have damaged during their fight, can be turned into quilt scraps; Celie eventually makes a gift of the finished quilt for Sophia and her children when they leave Harpo. The quilt represents the mutual gift of maternal support between Celie and Sofia, since their cooperative sewing offers some comfort from their hostile and abusive husbands. As a parting gift to Sofia and her children, Celie offers the blanket as a maternal gesture to protect them when "she and the children have to sleep on the floor" (69).

Later, Shug assumes maternal responsibility for Celie's new identity when she redirects Celie's rage against Albert by turning her energy towards sewing. According to Celie, Shug substitutes "a needle and not a razor in my hand" (137), marking Celie's new economic self-sufficiency and independence from Albert. And at the end of the novel, Albert is represented as stitching between the pauses in Celie's narrative while she tells him about the Olinka myth of the origin of racial differences. His sewing is represented in the text during the interstices of Celie's retelling of Olinkan cultural myths:

Guess what, I say to him, folks in Africa where Nettie and the children is believe white people is black people's children.

Naw, he say, like this interesting but his  
mind really on the slant of his next stitch.  
(238-39)

In the example above, Albert's sewing, a maternal gesture, is also Walker's discursive effect to figuratively close the interstices of Celie's story. The "maternal" history, passed from one sister to another, breaks down racial divisions by assuming a common origin for all people. Albert participates in the symbolic process of healing gender and racial divisions by sewing together the fragments of Celie's story. Nettie's transmission of African stories begins a process whereby both sisters participate in women's revisioning of history.

### III

#### The Maternal Subtexts of Nettie's Letters

Celie's letters to God, comprising roughly the first half of The Color Purple, become an interrupted narrative when Celie discovers a number of letters from her sister Nettie which have been intercepted and hidden by Albert. With the introduction of Nettie's letters, the text of The Color Purple becomes reconfigured as the correspondence between the two sisters creates a second narrative sequence within the novel.<sup>58</sup> As Molly Hite has noted, many

readers have focussed on this narrative disruption as an apparent flaw in Walker's writing in that "the letters from Nettie, with their disconcertingly literate depictions of life in an African village, intrude into the middle of the main action with little apparent motivation or warrant."<sup>59</sup> However, the familial relationship between Celie and Nettie yokes these two narratives as complementary "sister" texts, drawing together various narrative lines or filling gaps within each others' stories. Conscious of her role as surrogate mother to Celie's children, Nettie writes to Celie to preserve their bond as sisters and to enjoy their relations as family though their mutual love for Adam and Olivia. Through their shared interests as sisters and mothers, Celie's and Nettie's correspondence creates a "womanist text" through its concern for Celie's children and the common interest both women share in preserving their history. By weaving Nettie's letters into the general frame of Celie's story, Walker problematizes traditional concepts of narrative continuity as she shifts from the sequential discursive structure represented solely by Celie's letters (addressed to an unresponsive God) to a dialogical text written by two sisters which alternates the reader's focus between two communities of women.

Viewing dialogue as a crucial component of Afrocentric feminist epistemology, Patricia Hill Collins contextualizes the historical importance of dialogue in African oral

tradition as part of "the knowledge validation process of enslaved African-Americans."<sup>60</sup> The alternating groups of letters between Celie and Nettie can be read as an extended version of what Collins terms "the call-and-response discourse mode," a form of dialogue pervasive in African-American culture which depends on the "active participation of all individuals" (213).<sup>61</sup> Although Nettie never receives Celie's letters, she continues to write to Celie, and their correspondence becomes a conversation from Celie's vantage point since significant portions of Celie's subsequent letters are constructed in response to information found in Nettie's writing. The influence of Nettie in the development of Celie's thinking demonstrates the interactive process of dialogue which Collins describes as necessary for Black feminist standpoint theory: "For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community" (212).

To the extent that Celie records her complex interrelations with Shug, Sofia, and Mary Agnes, her letters expose the double affliction of racism and patriarchal oppression as affecting the lives of African-American women in the local context of the racially-segregated southern United States of the early 1900s. In comparison to Celie's letters, Nettie's letters extend an international scope to the pervasiveness of this dual oppression unfolding during

the same historical moment as Celie's writing but from within the perspective of Christianity's evangelizing mission as it precedes the movement of Western imperialism on the African continent. Rather than intruding into Celie's narrative, Nettie's letters function structurally in the novel by contributing to Celie's growing understanding of racist and patriarchal oppression.

Arguably, the most distinguishing feature of Nettie's correspondence centers around the question of the maternal identity of Adam and Olivia. In Nettie's letters, this question manifests itself in two distinct but related conflicts: first, Nettie's identity is challenged by the Olinka community because of her unmarried and childless status; subsequently, the Olinkas notice the physical resemblance between Nettie, Olivia, and Adam, which leads Corrine to assume that Nettie is the children's biological mother. Corrine's conflict with Nettie over the maternity of the children is described by Walker in terms of a crisis of faith which Corrine undergoes during her social mission to the Olinka peoples. Corrine's crisis of faith becomes a pretext for Nettie's documentation of European imperialism as it violently uproots and displaces the Olinka culture. This critique of imperialism, situated in the context of Nettie's and Corrine's crises over their maternal roles, becomes crucial to understanding Celie's rejection of the



white patriarchal God whom she no longer addresses in her letters.

Finally, Nettie's letters can be read as fulfilling a second critical agenda. The story of Nettie's struggle and her crisis of identity bear a marked similarity to that of Jane Eyre, one of English literature's most prominent fictional heroines. Parodying not only elements of plot but stylistic details within Brontë's text, Walker provides a post-colonial perspective of Jane Eyre as a product of nineteenth-century British culture. Juxtaposing her own identity as an African-American woman writer in relation to that of Brontë, another literary foremother, Walker uses Nettie's crisis as a means to criticize the exclusionary practices of a "cultural imperialism" that has ignored black women writers' contributions to a matrilineal literary history.

Prior to Nettie's letter which reveals the sisters' true paternal identity, Celie addresses God about her guilt over Alfonso's rape which has always preempted her concern for Adam and Olivia:

Now I know Nettie alive I begin to strut a little bit. Think, When she come home us leave here. Her and me and our two children. What they look like, I wonder. But it hard to think bout them. I feels shame. More than love, to tell the truth. Anyway, is they all right here? Got good sense and all? Shug say children got by incest turn into dunces. Incest part of the devil's plan. (138)

The evidence of Nettie's existence animates Celie, and she acknowledges Nettie's providential care of Adam and Olivia by affirming her sister's maternal role as cooperative with her own: "Her and me and our two children."

Celie's decision to discontinue addressing her letters to God marks the beginning of her feminine autonomy. After the discovery of Nettie's letters, Celie subsequently addresses only three more letters to God, and when Nettie reveals their family history, especially the fact that their father was lynched and that Alfonso is actually their stepfather, Celie accusingly addresses God as her sole audience for the final time:

My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my  
little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me.  
My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa.  
You must be sleep. (163)

In this passage, Walker conflates the crises of Celie's biological paternity with that of her "spiritual paternity." With her surprise and anger upon learning the truth behind the traumatic events of her childhood, Celie begins to write of a detached God who is unmoved by her suffering as a victim of rape and incest.

Nettie's revelation about Alfonso helps Celie confront the shame she feels over her stepfather's incestuous violence, influencing Celie's abrupt shift to Nettie as her sole audience until her final letter in the text which invokes a "God" whom she recognizes only in a universal context. Therefore, Celie replaces the dispassionate God of

her earlier letters with Nettie whom she construes as both her sister and the mother of her children.

This crucial narrative shift wherein Celie addresses Nettie as both a mother and sister in place of God occurs in an important sequence of the sisters' letters which focus on Nettie's social status as unmarried and childless woman. The Olinka community first challenges Nettie's identity when they deny the social status of single women. When Nettie asks one Olinka mother why only boys are sent to the mission school for classes, she is told by the mother that women gain their identities only through marriage and childbearing: "A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something" (144). When Nettie seeks to know more about what women in Olinka society can gain through marriage, the following exchange between an Olinka mother and Nettie takes place:

What can she become? I asked.  
 Why, she said, the mother of his children.  
 But I am not the mother of anybody's  
 children, I said, and I am something.  
 You are not much, she said.       The  
 missionary's drudge. (144-45)

From the Olinka's perspective, Nettie is pitiable and her importance is recognized only in her service to Samuel and Corrine. Nettie's crisis of identity intensifies when the Olinka people recognize a physical resemblance between Nettie, Olivia, and Adam, and assume that Nettie must be one of Samuel's wives. Unlike Celie who shares her maternal function by conferring the status of mother on Nettie,

Corrine withholds her former maternal concern from Nettie. She responds to the Olinka's error by formally distancing herself and Samuel from Nettie and by insisting that they each observe the protocol of polite address, a move intended to distract attention from the possibility of a conjugal relationship between Nettie and Samuel: "I think we should call one another brother and sister, all the time. Some of them can't seem to get it through their thick skulls that you are not Samuel's other wife" (146).

With Corrine's gradual distancing from Nettie, their separation becomes increasingly awkward since Nettie situates Corrine's withdrawal within the cultural context of the cooperation between Olinka mothers who share one husband:

Samuel is confused because to him, since the women are friends and will do anything for one another--not always, but more often than anyone from America would expect--and since they giggle and gossip and nurse each other's children, then they must be happy with things as they are. But many of the women rarely spend time with their husbands. Some of them were promised to old or middle-aged men at birth. Their lives always center around work and their children and other women (since a woman cannot really have a man for a friend without the worst kind of ostracism and gossip). (153)<sup>62</sup>

Through her withdrawal from Nettie, Corrine alienates herself from the maternal culture of the Olinkas that she came to serve. This irony affects Nettie as well, since Corrine's refusal of friendship forces Nettie to seek closer

friendship with the same Olinka women who deny her social status.

Corrine's view of maternity is thoroughly patriarchal since her maternal identity is threatened and she cannot share the affection of Adam and Olivia with Nettie. When Corrine contracts African fever, she becomes obsessed with the suspicion that Nettie and Samuel are the parents of Olivia and Adam. Nettie records the tortuous interchange with Corrine:

One day when I was changing her as she lay in bed, she gave me a long, mean, but somehow pitiful look. Why do my children look like you? she asked.

Do you really think they look so much like me? I said.

You could have spit them out, she said.

Maybe just living together, loving people makes them look like you, I said. You know how much some old married people look alike.

Even these women saw the resemblance the first day we came, she said.

But she just looked at me.

When did you first meet my husband? she wanted to know.

And that was when I knew what she thought. She thinks Adam and Olivia are my children, and that Samuel is their father!

Oh, Celie, this has been gnawing away at her all these years! (158)

This prolonged conflict which drives Nettie and Corrine apart also separates Corrine from the two children. Nettie writes:

I felt so sorry for her, and so humiliated, Celie. And the way she treats the children is the hardest part. She doesn't want them near her, which they don't understand. How could they? They don't even know they were adopted.

(159)

According to Nettie, Corrine's personal conflict over the maternal identity of her adopted children also deprives them of the knowledge of their own identities.

Nettie's terse account of the moment of Corrine's death also represents the moment of Corrine's "conversion," but the reader cannot separate Corrine's personal affirmation of religious belief from her act of reconciliation with Samuel and Nettie: "But Celie, in the middle of the night she woke up, turned to Samuel and said: I believe. And died anyway" (171). Although her final words "I believe" carry some ambiguity, the reader learns that Corrine had previously lost faith in the missionary enterprise upon which she and Samuel had embarked years before.

After his wife's death, Samuel reveals to Nettie that he and Corrine had become disillusioned with their work among the Olinka peoples, viewing their roles with the same pessimism as they once judged their relatives and missionary predecessors Aunt Theodosia and Aunt Althea:

We failed so utterly, he said. We became as comical as Althea and Theodosia. I think her awareness of this fueled Corrine's sickness. She was far more intuitive than I. Her gift for understanding people much greater. She used to say the Olinka resented us, but I wouldn't see it. But they do, you know. (209)

Instead of revealing Corrine's rejection of evangelicism directly through Nettie's observations, Walker situates Corrine's spiritual crisis within the context of her doubt over the identity of her adopted children's mother.

Nettie's observations of Corrine never suggest Corrine's disillusionment with the mission to the Olinkas but remain focussed on Corrine's personal conflict with Nettie and her relationship to Celie's children:

She gets weaker and weaker, and unless she can believe us and start to feel something for her children, I fear we will lose her.

Oh, Celie, unbelief is a terrible thing. And so is the hurt we cause others unknowingly.  
(169)

Despite the explicit religious overtones in Corrine's dying words, her final affirmation of "faith," according to Nettie's testimony, is predicated on her confession of belief that Celie, as opposed to Nettie, is the mother of her children. After Corrine's death, Samuel asks Nettie to forgive Corrine's suspicion which is designated as her "unbelief": "Yes, Sister Nettie, he said. Try not to hold her fears against her. At the end she understood, and believed" (174). If Corrine indeed "believed" at the time of her death, then she learned to affirm the fact that she had shared her maternity with Celie and with Nettie all along.

By relating Corrine's agony about her children's origin, Walker maintains the thematic integrity of her narrative in The Color Purple by forcing the reader's reflection back to Alfonso's sexual abuse of Celie and his subsequent injustice of secretly removing Adam and Olivia from her. Through Nettie's confession, Samuel and Corrine learn the truth of Celie's enforced sexual and maternal

servitude under the paternal authority of Albert and Alfonso. Nettie writes: "I told them the whole story. . . . Though the part about you and Pa was a real shock to him" (168-69). In keeping Celie's plight in the foreground of Nettie's narrative, Walker demonstrates how Alfonso's and Albert's mistreatment of Celie extends beyond their victimization of her to the larger social consequences of their violence which become discernable in Nettie's words as "the hurt we cause others unknowingly" (169). Alfonso's sexual abuse destroyed Celie's reproductive capacity, and Albert's subsequent abuse of Celie is replicated by his children who remain hostile to their adopted mother. This alienation between mothers and adopted children occurs between Corrine and Celie's children because Corrine is "infected" by a patriarchal logic that values children as possessions and which delegitimizes non-biological mothers who attempt to reproduce mothering without the "security" of paternal identification and ownership.

Walker's concern about the destructiveness of patriarchal authority as voiced in Celie's account is reiterated by Nettie, whose letters align the domestic imperialism of Albert's and Alfonso's households with the problem of religious evangelization which supports the aggrandizement of Western power on the African continent. Both forms of imperialism succeed respectively in destroying the maternal relations of Celie (and those of Corrine,



indirectly) and the mother culture which African-Americans seek. In Nettie's letters, Corrine's crisis of faith in her evangelizing mission is marked by the progressive diaspora of the Olinka peoples. This linking of Corrine's suffering with the description of the gradual displacement of the Olinka families occurs in one of Nettie's earlier letters describing Corrine's jealous suspicion of Nettie during her illness. First, Nettie relates her humiliation to Celie upon being asked by Corrine to reveal her stomach for signs of a previous pregnancy. In the same letter immediately following this description, Nettie abruptly switches the subject of her narration to explain to Celie how the advancing engineers and planters are responsible for the violent dispersal of Olinka families from the village:

The village is due to be planted in rubber trees this coming season. The Olinka hunting territory has already been destroyed, and the men must go farther and farther away to find game.

(159)

Nettie's subsequent letters describe the flight of individuals from the Olinka community into the wilderness as their final resources are depleted by Western developers. And in her final letter before Celie's rejection of God, Nettie briefly describes the Olinka ritual during Corrine's burial ceremony and at once begins speaking of the death of the Olinka culture itself. When engineers arrive to complete construction of a road which will destroy the Olinka village, Nettie confesses her astonishment over the

continued Olinka hospitality toward the encroaching developers: "It is understood by the Olinka that nothing good is likely to come from the same persons who destroyed their houses, but custom dies hard" (173). Ominously, Nettie reveals that one of the engineers being served by the Olinka "appeared to be enthusiastic about learning the language. Before, he says, it dies out" (173).

Immediately following this letter, Celie writes to Nettie that she has rejected the God who "just sit up there glorying in being deaf" to her suffering (176). With a sense of immediacy added to her suffering from Nettie's letters, Celie displaces God in favor of Nettie as her principle addressee: "I don't write to God no more, I write to you" (175). If some readers view Nettie's letters as a distracting intrusion into Celie's narrative, their response disregards the crucial and complex function of Nettie's correspondence in exposing the various imperialist agendas at work in the private and public spheres represented in The Color Purple.

With the conflation of Celie's and Nettie's letters, Walker indicates a relationship between the tragedy of the Olinka peoples and Celie's personal tragedy in that both are struggles of the disempowered against overwhelming and seemingly unchangeable forces. By constructing the parallel conflicts of Celie and the Olinka peoples through the narrative filter of Corrine's "crisis of faith," Walker

suggests the commonality of patriarchy and imperialism. The presumably white European rubber planters and engineers never acknowledge a prior claim to the land which sustains the social and cultural identity of the Olinka village but instead force the Olinka people into a situation of economic dependence, whereby they become indebted to the planters for both water and housing. The patriarchal logic of dominance exerted by the plantation owners is based only on their presumption of racial, ethnic, and class superiority over the Olinkas. Similarly, under the presumption of sexual dominance, Alfonso views Celie as mere property which he transfers to Albert without Celie's assent. In both cases of imperialism, domestic and international, the maternal (Celie/mother culture) is associated with property which is appropriated by patriarchal authority, or the law of the father operating both locally and globally.

Forced into a situation of material dependence on Albert, Celie later declares her intention to leave her husband who reaffirms his belief in Celie's complete powerlessness: "Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (187). Through his declaration of Celie's "nothingness," Albert cancels Celie's subjectivity and establishes her status of "inferiority" according to the constraints which American society already places on her race, class, and gender; in effect, Albert mimics the same ideology which justifies the

imperialist appropriation of African land represented in Nettie's letters.

Corrine's crisis of belief and the concomitant diaspora of the Olinka peoples serve as a fitting prelude to Celie's explanation of her rejection of God, demonstrating her awareness of the patriarchal agenda behind the stigmatization of those social categories which define her oppression. In the following conversation with Shug, Celie begins to formulate the oppositional logic that marks her dispossession as "poor," "black," and "a woman," in relation to the image of a powerful white man whose privileged status American Protestant fundamentalism identifies with God:<sup>63</sup>

Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. . . . If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you. [my emphasis] (175)

Celie not only asserts her gender, class, and racial difference from the dominant patriarchal structure which confines her, but she also envisions another social order where the "difference" of "poor colored women" is acknowledged rather than ignored or shunned.

During this same letter, Shug raises the question of the representation of God when she asks: "Tell me what your God look like, Celie" (176). Celie's response that "he big and old and tall and graybearded and white" confirms Shug's suspicion that Celie, like many African-Americans, is

victimized by an institutional religion which consistently propagates the image of a white male God, "the Father" who merely ratifies and reflects the social and political power structures which protect white dominance. In answer to Celie's query about why "the white folks' white bible" images a white male God, Shug's response demonstrates her belief in the tenacious grip of the racist ideology which informs "authorized" Scripture: "Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white" (177). Resisting the prevailing tendency to image a white male God from Biblical texts, Shug confronts the fact that the "white bible" representation of God problematizes African-American identity since blacks are held in subjugation by the logic of dominance which that image implies. Shug's understanding of the crippling effect of Celie's belief in a white male deity forces her to challenge Celie to literally "re-vision" God. According to Shug's theology, "God is inside you and inside everybody else" and thus defies representation: "It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything" (178).

Shug admits to Celie that attempting to conceptualize God in other than conventional images demands active resistance. In attempting to free Celie from the constricting image of a white male God, Shug creates a chain of linguistic references to God which move away from visual imagery and toward experiential metaphors:

My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh. [my emphasis]  
(178)

With this startling evocation of God in both maternal and erotic metaphors, Shug blatantly thwarts a constraining patriarchal logic that has typically polarized women's sexuality between the conventionally masculinist social roles of "madonna" and "whore."<sup>64</sup>

Shug identifies the experience of being without God as that of a "motherless child," and in doing so implies a relationship with God similar to that between a mother and her child. Shug's choice of mother-child relations is an apt metaphor in its literal suggestion of a process of psychological growth. Contrary to the experience of "a motherless child," Shug's first intimation of God includes "that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all." In terms of psycho-social development, Shug is describing the process of primary identification of the infant with its mother, when, in Nancy Chodorow's words, "The infant experiences itself as merged or continuous with the world generally, and with its mother or caretakers in particular."<sup>65</sup>

But Shug's spiritual infancy in relation to a maternal God develops beyond this "cognitive narcissism"<sup>66</sup> and extends to a more reciprocal relationship which she equates with the giving and receiving of sexual pleasure. Earlier in her friendship with Shug, Celie confesses that she has never experienced an erotic heterosexual relationship, but, during her sexual encounter with Shug, she describes her feeling of sexual pleasure from the perspective of mother-child relations:

She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth.

. . . . .  
Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth.

Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too. (109)

In urging Celie to revise her image of God, Shug appeals to Celie in terms of her sexuality as well as her race. Therefore, when Shug describes her feeling for God as erotic, she strokes Celie's thigh to indicate the mutual sexual pleasure she and Celie have shared.

In her letters to Celie, Nettie unintentionally reinforces Shug's efforts to problematize conventional representations of God in terms of sex and race. Like Shug, Nettie avoids describing God with visual imagery, but when she first learns that the Olinkas worship roofleaf, she accomodates their belief with the following rationalization: "We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?" (142). Later, however, Nettie

completely renounces the identification of God with any visual image, thereby discarding the anthropomorphic tendencies of religions which have historically attempted to represent God as familiar:

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone--a roofleaf or Christ--but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us. (227)

Nettie's commonplace usage of the pronomial "he" in reference to God is contextualized here by her allusion to the conventional anthropomorphizing of God by "most people," and she does not repeat the pronoun "he" in subsequent allusions to God in her letters. However, Shug adamantly rejects the use of gendered pronomial references to God when she states that "God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (177).

Nettie's reappraisal of a traditionally white male God begins prior to her journey to Africa when she writes to Celie of the difficulty of reconceptualizing the historical roles of black peoples in a Biblical history that has been transmitted through racist ideological filters:

Over the pulpit there is a saying: Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands to God. Think what it means that Ethiopia is Africa! All the Ethiopians in the bible were colored. It had never occurred to me, though when you read the bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures in the bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words. All the people are white and so you just think all the people from the bible were white too. But really white white people lived somewhere else during those times. That's why the bible says that Jesus Christ had



hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight, Celie. It isn't even curly. (125-26)

Nettie correctly reasons that Biblical illustrations which are literally meant to illuminate the sacred text in fact obstruct the reader's understanding of the extent to which African culture informs ancient Near Eastern history. Her suggestion that the historical person of Jesus was probably of a darker complexion is consonant with the discomfort she feels with the pictures of Christ and the white missionaries hanging in her hut which make her feel "small and unhappy" (147). More comfortable in proximity to her mother culture, Nettie eventually replaces these pictures with indigenous folk art given to her by the Olinka people.

Nettie's vision of Africa cannot be understood without situating her narrative within the historical context with which Walker begins Nettie's journey. Nettie relates her account of the voyage to Africa as both a spiritual mission and a cultural awakening which begins in New York's Harlem district, an area which, since the first decades of the 1900s, was steadily becoming the African-American cultural center of the nation.<sup>67</sup> She describes the economic prosperity of Harlem as seen through the supportive network of churches she visits with Samuel and Corrine:

Listen, Celie. New York is a beautiful city. And colored own a whole section of it, called Harlem. There are colored people in more fancy motor cars than I thought existed, and living in houses that are finer than any white person's house down home. There are more than a hundred churches! And we went to every one of them. And

I stood before each congregation with Samuel and Corrine and the children and sometimes our mouths just dropped open from the generosity and goodness of those Harlem people's hearts. They live in such beauty and dignity, Celie. And they give and give and then reach down and give some more, when the name "Africa" is mentioned.

They love Africa. They defend it at the drop of a hat. And speaking of hats, if we had passed our hats alone they would not have been enough to hold all the donations to our enterprise. Even the children dredged up their pennies. (126)

The enthusiasm Nettie expresses about the life of Harlem and the dignity of its people offers an alternative view to the largely rural setting of The Color Purple and is consonant with the African-American movement of racial uplift which began in the early 1900s. Nettie's account not only establishes a contrast between the lives of the people of Harlem and those "down home," but she records the pride in Africa which Marcus M. Garvey had inspired in African-Americans when he began preaching from Harlem pulpits in 1916 about the liberation of African peoples.<sup>68</sup> Nettie's letters influence Celie's process of self-affirmation since they articulate the historical significance of racial uplift and cultural identification with all peoples of color, ideas which resist African-American acculturation into the social and religious ideology which promulgates white dominance.

Walker develops the theme of racial uplift when Nettie visits the New York office of the Missionary Society and feels downcast upon finding only portraits of white men who are merely reflections of the white patriarchal God:

"Someone named Speke, somebody called Livingstone. Somebody called Daly. Or was it Stanley?"<sup>69</sup> However, Samuel appeals to her to reflect on their mission as specifically directed toward the goal of racial uplift:

Samuel looked a little sad too, but then he perked up and reminded us that there is one big advantage we have. We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves. And that we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere. (127)

Upon her arrival in Africa, Nettie continues to affirm her race with her initial impression of the Senegalese: "I felt like I was seeing black for the first time" (131). Nettie's recognition of blackness in the Senegalese people is also a self-recognition since she identifies her race with theirs. Nettie's arrival in Africa marks a spiritual and cultural rebirth since she has been like a lost daughter returning to her origins in the mother country.

The idea of a "Mother Africa" was frequently extolled by proponents of racial uplift during the Harlem Renaissance. David L. Lewis describes Marcus Garvey's anti-imperialist vision of a pan-African culture which became enthusiastically endorsed by thousands of Harlem residents,

for whom Africa and blackness but a short time before were synonymous for barbarism and pariah status, [and who] accepted the Garveyite vision of a nascent Mother Africa, united and mightier than in the days of the great pharaohs, her ancient arts and sciences the envy of the planet. (36-37)

Consonant with Garvey's view, Nettie reveals to Celie that her reading of African-American novelist and journalist Joel A. Rogers has taught her that "Africans once had a better civilization than the Europeans" (129). But what Nettie once refers to as "the 'dark' continent" (154) does not exactly coincide with the mythico-political vision of Marcus Garvey's "renascent Mother Africa." Instead, Africa becomes for Nettie the locale of reading and interpreting her common oppression with the Olinka peoples, whose way of life is rapidly dying as their culture encounters Western imperialism. If "Mother Africa" is a scene of rebirth in The Color Purple, then African-American culture as her lost child, not Africa's indigenous population, is being rejuvenated through Nettie's concern with her African origins. For example, Nettie becomes ecstatic "to discover that Tashi had the original version" to an Uncle Remus tale told by Olivia; at the same time, Nettie's progress in understanding her past is frustrated by the Olinkas who admit "no responsibility whatsoever" for their past complicity with slave trading (152). Through her concern with rediscovering her cultural past, Nettie transmits African stories of origin to Celie, thus linking the mother culture with the daughter culture. Nettie's transmission of stories to Celie engages both women in what Gerda Lerner has termed "the dialectic of women's history."<sup>70</sup>

According to Lerner's theory, this dialectical process occurs as a "tension between women's actual historical experience and their exclusion from interpreting that experience" (5). While Lerner recognizes women's agency in history, she points to their systematic exclusion "from the enterprise of creating symbol systems, philosophies, science, law . . .[and] theory-formation" (5). Through her transmission of Olinka etiological stories in her letters, Nettie also becomes responsible for her sister's participation in the dialectic of women's history when Celie reflects on the mythic origins of racial oppression. However, Walker does not present the Olinka myths through Nettie's voice but instead filters Nettie's words through Celie, who recreates the narrative of racial oppression through the metaphor of parent-child relations. As she sews on the porch with Albert, Celie begins to narrate Nettie's account: "folks in Africa where Nettie and the children is believe white people is black peoples children" (238). Celie continues retelling the myth by directing Albert's focus to a maternal perspective, or the experience of one mother and child, explaining that the first black woman who bore a white infant was sacrificed with her child because the Olinkas "don't like nothing around them that look or act different"(239). Celie then repeats the Olinka belief that the Biblical Adam was the first white man whom the Olinkas did not murder, but that previous white births were not

tolerated in the community: "the Africans throwed out the white Olinkas for how they look. They throwed out the rest of us, all us who become slaves, for how us act" (239). At this point in her retelling of Olinka mythology, Celie develops the parent-child metaphor when she associates "them that act and look different" with the progeny who fail to reproduce or mirror the sameness of the Olinka race and culture: "What they did, these Olinka peoples, was throw out they own children, just cause they was a little different" (240). According to Celie's account, the Biblical serpent represents the Olinka people who also stand for the entire black race, the "white folks sign for they parents" because of their anger of being rejected (240). In concluding her story, Celie articulates a solution to resist this "parent-child" hostility over difference by describing a relationship with a maternal God: "the only way to stop making somebody the serpent is for everybody to accept everybody else as a child of God, or one mother's children, no matter what they look like or how they act" (my emphasis; 241).

Celie's understanding of God is not far from Shug's belief in the maternal deity she once conjectured when comparing a person without God to "a motherless child." In Celie's version of the Olinka myth, both mothers and children share the burden of scapegoat in the community since they are equally condemned to death or driven out of

the community for their offense in producing or representing difference. Although the story apparently explains the origins of racial difference and the practice of racism which arises from intolerance of difference, the mother-child metaphor expands the hermeneutic range of the myth to include gender relations as well. Celie's past is indelibly marked by Alfonso's imposition of silence and Albert's intolerance of her self-expression; however, Celie's retelling of the myth to Albert and her identification of God with maternal qualities mark her participation in women's narrativizing of history, or what Lerner describes as the point of conflict between her "actual historical experience" and her marginalization in "the meaning-giving process of interpretation and explanation" (5). As a result of this tension, Celie contributes to the recognition of women's "centrality and active role in creating a society" (Lerner 5).

To the extent that Nettie's writing encourages Celie to explain her own history and to participate in its creation, Walker's novel validates Emory Elliott's argument that The Color Purple fictionally rewrites a suppressed American past from the point of view of those African-American women who have been denied agency and voice in the creation of that history:

The Color Purple is not only about history, it creates history, a black female history to supplement, if not supplant, a white male history created by others. It is a work in what Linda

Hutcheon has termed "the historio-graphic mode," an advanced form of postmodernism that restores the historical dimension to fiction by acknowledging that all forms of writing express and participate in history.<sup>71</sup>

Viewed as a singular text, Nettie's writing can also be read as a participation in a revisionist process aimed toward reevaluating the history of English literature by women since Walker so obviously structures Nettie's African experience according to the superficial plot of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. A comparative summary reviewing the course followed by each heroine demonstrates Walker's obvious parody of Brontë's novel: Walker's Nettie and Brontë's Jane both experience trauma and social displacement when their parents die at an early age, and although each heroine is later presumed dead by her relatives, each reunites with supposedly lost family members at the end of her narrative; as homeless orphans, Nettie and Jane struggle to attain an education and become teachers while enduring the hostility of resentful members of an extended family, represented by Alfonso and Albert, who at different times share responsibility for Nettie, and by Mrs. Reed who is Jane's legal guardian; during their journeys, Nettie and Jane seek shelter and work within a household as a governess, and both are given the opportunity to enter religious missionary service; Corrine, who could be read as Walker's analogue to Bertha Mason, undergoes a form of madness before her death, after which Nettie marries Samuel,



who, like Rochester, served as her former employer and guardian.

Supporting my reading, Gerald Early's analysis of The Color Purple cites Walker's abundant use of Victorian clichés which "indicates recognition of and paying homage to a tradition."<sup>72</sup> But unlike Early's reading, I take seriously Walker's unwavering concern with African-American women's cultural production and the problem of the historical transmission of that culture. Therefore, I read Nettie's letters as challenging the privileged canonical status of Brontë's novel as well as the interpretive authority of readers who are responsible for that selective process whereby texts become validated and enshrined in the canon.

In her essay "One Child of One's Own," Walker cites the example of Jane Eyre when she takes issue with Patricia Meyer Spacks, whose book The Female Imagination includes a justification for addressing only Anglo-American women writers.<sup>73</sup> When Spacks chooses for critical discussion "works everyone knows (Jane Eyre, Middlemarch)" and "works that should be better known (The Story of Mary MacLane)," Walker wryly comments that Spacks "means, of course white women in the Anglo-American literary tradition" (372).

Furthermore, Walker criticizes Spacks's editorial decision to include only those literary works that present "familiar experience," or those representative of a

"familiar cultural setting" (372). When Spacks defends her decision not to examine the literary production of African-American or Third World women (claiming her inability "to construct theories about experiences I haven't had"), Walker retorts: "Yet Spacks never lived in nineteenth century Yorkshire, so why theorize about the Brontës?" (372). Walker rejects Spacks's critical assumptions and investigative rationale as racist and classist, or in Walker's own terms, as "white, and middle class, and because, to Spacks, female imagination is only that" (372). For Walker, any attempt such as Spacks's move to delimit the female imagination according to the literary production of predominantly white and middle-class women represents nothing less than a form of cultural imperialism.

Although the Brontës serve as her textbook case for arguing against a highly restrictive canon, Walker nevertheless admits her childhood fondness for Charlotte Brontë's writing, especially Jane Eyre:

"My teachers lent me books. Jane Eyre was my friend for a long time. Books became my world because the world I lived in was very hard."<sup>74</sup>

While Walker acknowledges Charlotte Brontë as a friend and therefore one of many of her literary foremothers, she also admits the material constraints of her African-American childhood and young adult life. In contrast, the Brontës represent those authors who, because of their race as well as their social and class status, enjoy a more privileged

place in the canon of women writers than most African-American women authors. In her essay "Saving the Life That Is Your Own," Walker enlarges the previously narrow cultural space of Spacks's "female imagination" by establishing a point of comparison between the poetics of African-American writer Toni Morrison and that of her nineteenth-century predecessors the Brontë sisters:

It has been said that someone asked Toni Morrison why she writes the kind of books she writes, and that she replied: Because they are the kind of books I want to read.

This remains my favorite reply to that kind of question. As if anyone reading the magnificent, mysterious Sula or the grim, poetic The Bluest Eye would require more of a reason for their existence than for the brooding, haunting Wuthering Heights, for example, or the melancholy, triumphant Jane Eyre. (I am not speaking here of the most famous short line of that book, "Reader, I married him," as the triumph, but, rather, of the triumph of Jane Eyre's control over her own sense of morality and her own stout will, which are but reflections of her creator's, Charlotte Brontë, who no doubt wished to write the sort of book she wished to read.)<sup>75</sup>

While Walker expresses admiration for Charlotte Brontë's writing, she does not romanticize Jane's marriage to Rochester but instead applauds the heroine's freedom of "control over her own sense of morality and her own stout will," privileges that Walker recognizes as Brontë's own and of which few African-American women writers could boast.

As Walker has tirelessly emphasized, the recovery of an African-American maternal history is an almost impossible task. Because African-American women's history is marked by

the repression of creativity as slave women endured repeated rape and the seemingly endless routine of biological reproduction, Walker is forced to resort to speculation about black women's cultural production:

"Or was her body broken and forced to bear children (who were more often than not sold away from her)--eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children--when her one joy was the thought of modeling heroic figures of rebellion, in stone or clay?"<sup>76</sup>

As for the African-American authors whom Walker locates and acknowledges as literary foremothers, these women writers had to face a different set of constraints based on race, class, and gender. For example, nineteenth-century African-American Frances E. W. Harper, writing in the service of racial uplift, was compelled to follow prevailing Victorian and bourgeois social conventions in her writing in order to confront demeaning stereotypes of black women as sexually promiscuous or morally inferior.<sup>77</sup> Writing in England under similarly constraining social conventions affecting their gender and to some extent their economic class, the Brontës did not share a burden equal to their contemporary African-American women writers who had to revise representations of black women against such radically extreme stereotyping of their race and gender.

Essays such as "One Child of One's Own" and "Saving the Life That Is Your Own" demonstrate Walker's complex and often paradoxical agenda of reevaluating such nineteenth-century feminine "ideals" as marriage, motherhood, and

domesticity in her writing while directly challenging the "authority" of such canonical literary works that exalted these virtues.<sup>78</sup> And in these same essays, Walker situates herself, as well as her African-American predecessors such as Frances E. W. Harper, Zora Neale Hurston, and her contemporaries such as Toni Morrison, within a formerly exclusive ("white, and middle-class") canon.

In "Saving the Life That Is Your Own," Walker once remarked that she believed American "black writers and white writers seem to me to be writing one immense story--the same story, for the most part--with different parts of this immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives" (5). And in an earlier essay, "Beyond the Peacock," Walker confides a similar message to her mother during their visit to Flannery O'Connor's homesite: "Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer's story. And the whole story is what I'm after."<sup>79</sup> If Walker attests to finding consolation in childhood through her reading of Charlotte Brontë, now as a literary daughter she nevertheless searches for "the missing parts" of Jane Eyre as she qualifies its reception (including that of Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights) for African-American women readers and writers:

(It should be remembered that, as a black person, one cannot completely identify with a Jane Eyre, or with her creator, no matter how much one admires them. And certainly, if one

allows history to impinge on one's reading pleasure, one must cringe at the thought of how Heathcliff, in the New World far from Wuthering Heights, amassed his Cathy-dazzling fortune.)  
 ("Saving the Life That Is Your Own" 8)

Here, Walker's evident admiration for the Brontë sisters is tempered by more than the racial difference and historical oppression of African-American women. Walker's historically informed reading contextualizes the Brontës' novels as cultural products reflecting the imperialist ideology of nineteenth-century Great Britain. Near the conclusion of this essay, Walker returns to her earlier statement about Morrison's rationale for writing and articulates what can be read as a justification for her revisionist stance toward Jane Eyre:

To take Morrison's statement further, if that is possible, in my own work I write not only what I want to read--understanding fully and indelibly that if I don't do it no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction--I write all the things I should have been able to read. (13)

As Walker parodically rewrites Brontë's novel in The Color Purple, she invites readers to reconsider Jane Eyre from the perspective of the African-American women writer, displacing what Gayatri Spivak has referred to as "a cult text of feminism."<sup>80</sup>

In fact, Nettie's letters describing her missionary work among the Olinkas as well as the crisis of identity she undergoes in Africa accords with Spivak's analysis of

heroines of nineteenth-century British literature, especially her critique of Jane Eyre. According to Spivak,

what is at stake, for feminist individualism in the age of imperialism, is precisely the making of human beings, the constitution and "interpellation" of the subject not only as individual but as "individualist." This stake is represented on two registers: childbearing and soul making. The first is domestic-society-through-sexual-reproduction cathected as "companionate love"; the second is the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social-mission. (244)

In her essay, Spivak contends that "access to individualism" for the nineteenth-century heroine reflects an elitist preoccupation of a literate and materially privileged social class of women whereby "the female individualist, not-quite/not-male, articulates herself in shifting relationship to . . . the 'native female' as such (within discourse, as a signifier) [who] is excluded from any share in this emerging norm" (244-245). Spivak's reading shifts the critic's focus on Jane Eyre from an emphasis on the "subject-constitution of the female individualist" and redirects the reader's attention to the political implications of imperialist narratives as they effect dehumanizing representations of Third World subjects.

Spivak's critique of Jane Eyre demonstrates how imperialist ideology is often elaborated in nineteenth-century texts under the guise of "social mission," such as Brontë's affirmation of St. John's religious vocation at the conclusion of her novel. Spivak suggests that if

"nineteenth-century feminist individualism could conceive of a 'greater' project than access to the closed circle of the nuclear family," then this activity could only consist of "soul making beyond 'mere' sexual reproduction" (248). In her parodic treatment of episodes from Jane Eyre, Walker rejects both of these mothering roles by challenging the "soul making" and "childbearing" agendas of conventional nineteenth-century texts. As I argued earlier, Nettie's letters self-consciously expose the complicity between religious missions and their sponsorship among Western imperialist nations whose commercial interests in Africa destroy local cultures. Whereas Nettie, Samuel, and Corrine first enthusiastically embrace their service in the Missionary Society, each explicitly rejects evangelism almost coincidentally with the approach of the engineers who begin to destroy the forests and subsequently the Olinka village. After Corrine's death, Samuel confides to Nettie that Corrine had detected the resentment of the Olinkas and eventually lost confidence in her role as a missionary teacher; later, he confesses similar doubts to Nettie during their visit to the Missionary Society's office in England.

Furthermore, Walker maintains an ironic distance through Nettie's writing when Nettie and Samuel naively present their appeal to the Missionary Society on behalf of the Olinkas, resulting in their censure by the bishop for moral impropriety because of their unmarried status.



Samuel's adamant defense--"We behave as brother and sister to each other" (206)--deliberately manipulates an episode in Jane Eyre where St. John refuses Jane's offer to accompany him to India as his sister: "'Again I tell you it is not the insignificant private individual . . . I wish to mate: it is the missionary'" (357). Walker effectively mimics St. John's imagined dilemma of having to justify a relationship with Jane outside of marriage as the hypocritical bishop smirks in response to Samuel's explanation: "'Appearances. What must the natives think?'" Although Jane scorns St. John's ascetic "idea of love," she concludes her narrative by rationalizing St. John's "higher calling" as a religious pilgrim: "He may be stern; he may be exacting; he may be ambitious yet; but his is the sternness of the warrior Greathart, who guards his pilgrim convoy from the onslaught of Apollyon" (398). St. John is clearly a reflection of the white patriarchal deity which Walker rejects in favor of a maternal God. But Brontë's novel further endorses the evangelical mission by glorifying St. John's "vocation," comparing him to an "apostle, who speaks but for Christ" and distinguishing him as one who "labours for his race."<sup>81</sup> In Jane's final meditation, her idea of "race" coincides with St. John's comparative superior stance when referring to "the savage tribes" of India (359). Walker's parody, however, transforms the conflict of racial difference between the missionary and indigenous peoples into a

recognition of racial affinity between African-Americans and the Olinka people. As long as Samuel views his racial identity as a means of becoming a more effective instrument of religious conversion, he nevertheless continues to reproduce the ideology of the Missionary Society which is complicitous with imperialism. But Walker represents Samuel as a more benign patriarch than St. John in that Samuel sees his mission not as the redemption of savages but as "the uplift of black people everywhere" (127).

Spivak's post-colonial reading of Brontë's text explains Jane Eyre's enabling move from "counter-family to the family-in-law" by exposing a discourse which reflects and augments "the active ideology of imperialism." This ideology becomes apparent in the novel when Brontë represents Rochester's legal wife, Bertha Mason, as subhuman in order to justify Jane's eventual marriage to him: "Bertha's function in Jane Eyre is to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal and thereby to weaken her entitlement under the spirit if not the letter of the Law" (249).

Walker's analogue to Bertha Mason's dehumanization is represented by Corrine's affliction of temporary "madness" and her eventual death which creates the possibility for the union of Samuel and Nettie. Walker's version, however, is not superficially mimetic; rather, it demonstrates the political effect of parody which Linda Hutcheon terms "the

ideological consequences" of "installing and ironizing" original representations.<sup>82</sup> Throughout The Color Purple, Nettie, like Jane, moves "through a sequential arrangement of the family/counter-family dyad" (Spivak 246).<sup>83</sup> Nettie's and Celie's biological parents represent their legal family until after the time of their father's death when their new stepfather Alfonso rapes Celie, forming an incestuous counter-family; Celie's marriage to Albert represents another legal family where Nettie resides to escape from Alfonso, but Albert's sexual interest in Nettie creates another counter-family situation; finally, Corrine and Samuel represent the legal family who shelters Nettie, but the presence of Celie's children, who resemble Nettie and who have been adopted by the family, contribute to Corrine's "madness" and suspicion of an alliance between Nettie and Samuel, the third counter-family in Walker's narrative. In all these examples from Walker's novel, the movement from family to counter-family is initiated through some form of patriarchal abuse of power, resulting in a crisis for the mother (Celie's mother, Celie, and Corrine respectively) and the displacement of their "daughters" (first Celie, and then the twice-displaced Nettie).

According to Spivak's reading, Jane's move from the status of counter-family to legal union with Rochester is accomplished through a rhetoric "produced by the axiomatics of imperialism" which renders Bertha Mason as inhuman, the

"not-yet-human Other, of soul making" (247).<sup>84</sup> If Corrine can be read as Walker's parodic analogue to Bertha Mason, Walker's representation of Corrine's "insanity" must be evaluated in conjunction with Brontë's technical rendition of "the madwoman in the attic."<sup>85</sup> In The Color Purple, Corrine's temporary insanity is manifested by a nagging suspicion of a prior sexual union between Samuel and Nettie. This jealousy, which is exacerbated by Corrine's bout with African fever, causes Corrine to violently withdraw her affection from her children and Nettie. Compared to Corrine's crisis, Bertha's violent marginalization is a simpler authorial manipulation since Brontë gives Bertha no children or prior domestic function. Walker, however, contextualizes the conflict between Samuel, Corrine, and Nettie as a domestic dispute which begins when the Olinka women notice the physical similarity between Nettie and Celie's children. While Corrine's "madness" is convincing enough to produce the parody of Bertha Mason's hostile reaction to the usurping governess, Nettie's letters retain Corrine's humanity and maternal dignity by communicating Corrine's disease and dysfunction as a crisis of faith.

As I argued earlier, Corrine's demise serves Walker's ultimate purpose of criticizing imperialism as she aligns Corrine's death with that of the Olinka culture. Commenting on the status of the black West Indian character of

Christophine in Wide Sargasso Sea, Jean Rhys's revision of Jane Eyre, Spivak claims that

no perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other [Christophine] that consolidates the imperialistic self. (253)

Spivak's claim, insofar as it accounts for Christophine's marginality in Rhys's text, nevertheless illuminates Walker's critique of canonical English literary history in her African-American revision of Jane Eyre. For Walker, Corrine's function is never meant to be read as "the Other" of The Color Purple. Through her parody of Bertha Mason, Walker transforms the figure of "the Other" in Brontë's text to a social identity, a married woman and mother, whose race does not affect her status of selfhood in relation to the other agents in her family crisis. Beyond the obvious racial affinity between Corrine and all the novel's primary characters, Walker often awkwardly overstates Corrine's educational achievement and social cultivation to the extent that Corrine is the only woman who personifies the theme of racial uplift introduced in Nettie's letters. Therefore, if Corrine represents "the Other" as an analogue to Bertha Mason, she does so only as "other," in that she is Walker's exceptional African-American woman, the embodiment of self-realization and potentiality in the racially segregated African-American culture of the 1940s.

In contrast to Brontë's violent representation of Bertha Mason, Walker's narrative about Corrine's "crisis" is not symptomatic of the "axiomatrics of imperialism," as Nettie demonstrates through her preservation of Corrine's humanity and maternal identity. Instead, Walker frees Nettie to voice her growing doubt about the work of the Missionary Society and finally to condemn the imperialistic aggression that destroys the Olinka community. Through her racial identity with the Olinka people, Nettie partially shares the burden of their victimization as the community disintegrates from the pressure of outside forces.

Finally, Walker's parody also engages in a gender critique of Jane Eyre. In the conclusion of the novel, Jane gives birth to Rochester's children, reproducing the patriarchal system that informs Brontë's text. In contrast, Nettie's self-representation at the time of her marriage indicates her age as past childbearing:

I try to picture what the years have brought you in the way of weight and wrinkles--or how you fix your hair. From a skinny, hard little something I've become quite plump. And some of my hair is gray. (202)

Married in middle age, Nettie becomes the guardian of Celie's children who later reunite with their biological mother in a social order where the hierarchies of gender and race are beginning to erode. Walker, however, sustains a parodic rendition of the romance ideology informing the union between Rochester and Jane, or what Spivak terms

"domestic-society-through-sexual-reproduction cathected as 'companionate love'" (244). Jane's description of her married life with Rochester speaks directly to their relationship in terms of a domestic society nurtured through the conversation between intimate companions:

I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together. To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and audible thinking. All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character--perfect concord is the result. (my emphasis; 397)

Like Brontë's description, Walker's version of married life between Nettie and Samuel emphasizes the importance of companionship through conversation:

We began to feel ourselves a family, without Corrine. And people meeting us on the street never failed (if they spoke to us at all) to express the sentiment that the children looked just like the two of us. The children began to accept this as natural, and began going out to view the sights that interested them, alone. Leaving their father and me to our quieter, more sedate pleasures, one of which was simple conversation. (my emphasis; 207)

The final line of this passage demonstrates the flexibility of Walker's verbal craft in appropriating Brontë's tone, cadence, and diction. More than just disinterested satire of Edward and Jane, Walker's creates a companionate relationship between Samuel and Nettie to offer as a final point in contrast to the family which is formed at the

conclusion of Jane Eyre: whereas Nettie's and Samuel's relationship is qualified by their guardianship of Celie's children, whose semblance as biological offspring is accepted as "natural," Jane and Rochester dismiss their dependent Adèle, who is sent to boarding school for "a sound English education" in order to correct "her French defects" (396). Walker's parodic encoding calls further attention to the pervasive influence of nationalism in Brontë's discourse which effects a division in Jane's and Rochester's family. Therefore, the maternal subtext of Nettie's letters concludes by plainly contrasting two kinds of mothering activity, one which is adversarial and rejecting and another which is inclusive and affirming. These contrasting maternal relations refer to all the paradigms of maternity in The Color Purple, both local and global, which are affected by the potentially destructive forces of racism, sexism, nationalism, and the logic of dominance which perpetuates them.

Finally, The Color Purple is a "womanist" text because it is the story of African-American women who weave together their maternal identities and histories in order to revise their oppressive circumstances and to rewrite more acceptable scripts for themselves. Read as a twentieth-century parody of Jane Eyre, Nettie's letters stand in contrast to the conventional narratives of nineteenth-century white heroines whose struggle for individualism



would have been difficult if not impossible to reproduce in African-American literature by women of the same period. Similarly, bell hooks has argued that the idea of Celie is a fiction, emphasizing the practical impossibility of Celie as a writer of letters under the adversary conditions of racial and gender oppression which Walker represents. However, the importance of Celie and Nettie in The Color Purple lies beyond Walker's success or failure in writing social realism. Through Nettie's letters, Walker's twentieth-century parody of a canonical English text situates The Color Purple in a revisionist tradition as a postmodern and political novel. Likewise, Walker's refusal to romanticize Celie's painful struggle for subjectivity represents what Deborah McDowell has termed a "paradigm shift" toward the creation of heroines who represent "greater complexity and possibility" for African-American women<sup>86</sup>. If McDowell's assessment of contemporary writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison is correct, then Walker's creation of Celie and Nettie goes far in enlarging our understanding of the evolution of an African-American literature in a matrilineal tradition.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "An Angle of Seeing Motherhood" in Black Feminist Criticism (New York: Pergamon, 1985) 211-52. Subsequent references to Christian are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> While Christian does not elaborate on Western notions of motherhood, she recognizes the patriarchal agenda implicit in the romanticizing of maternity within the institution of marriage:

On the one hand, the white society honors motherhood as a pure sanctified state, and like African religions, buttresses this assumption with religion and myth. On the other hand, it punishes individual mothers for being mothers. By relegating all care and responsibility of the child to individual mothers rather than to the society, it restricts women at every level of the society. (221)

Christian therefore represents the contradictions within African-American maternity as a tripartite ideological clash: "Hence three points of view--the Afro-American community's view of motherhood, the white American view of motherhood, and the white American view of black motherhood--intersect to produce a distinctly complex ideology of Afro-American motherhood" (219). Christian also justly emphasizes the ambivalence of African-Americans toward birth control and reproductive rights since their history in the United States is marked by contradictory efforts which both encouraged the reproduction of the labor force among slaves while anxiously monitoring and controlling the black population at large.

In addition to Barbara Christian, see Patricia Hill Collins' chapter "Black Women and Motherhood" in her book Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and The Politics of Empowerment (Perpectives on Gender 2), ed. Kay Deaux et al. (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1990) 115-38.

<sup>3</sup> Activities of mothers do not merely contribute to the wealth of realistic details in the novel. Representative critical investigations of motherhood which move beyond Walker's realism and to which I will refer later in this chapter include Molly Hite's The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) and "Romance, Marginality, Matrilineage: Alice Walker's The Color Purple and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God" Novel 22.3 (Spring 1989): 257-73; Dianne F. Sadoff's "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 11.1 (1985): 4-25; Deborah E. McDowell's "'The Changing Same': Generational Connections

and Black Women Novelists" in New Literary History 18.2 (1987): 281-302; and Marianne Hirsch, "Feminist Discourse/Maternal Discourse: Speaking With Two Voices" in The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989) 162-199.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Christian's comparison of motherhood in the writings of Buchi Emecheta and Alice Walker is anchored in the concept of the mother's personal identity or "selfhood": While both writers clearly see the experience of motherhood as a profound one, they protest its use by society as a means to ends other than [sic] the value of human life, including and especially their own. Because women are reduced to the function of the mother, which often results in their loss of a sense of self, the gift of seeing the world from that angle is lost to them and their communities. (Black Feminist Criticism 246)

Like Christian, Susan Willis also argues that Celie's "personal and historical transition" from a dependent adolescent daughter, wife, and mother is accomplished through her economic and sexual self-determination. See "Alice Walker's Women," New Orleans Review 12.1 (1985): 33-41. Ruth El Saffar focuses on Celie's writing as the vehicle which establishes her subjectivity and prevents the threat of Celie's "total annihilation" as a victim of incest, premature childbearing, and wife beating. El Saffar argues that this transformation marks Walker's text not as historical but as twentieth-century romance fiction. See "Alice Walker's The Color Purple," International Fiction Review 12.1 (1985): 11-17. Charles Proudfit examines mother-daughter bonds to contrast Celie's "arrested psychological development" in the early part of the novel to her establishment of gender identity where her "nascent self is reflected back to itself" through Shug's surrogate maternal relationship with Celie. See "Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's The Color Purple," Contemporary Literature 32.1 (1991): 12-37. It is interesting that Proudfit's analysis of the mother in Walker's novel is one of the few which gives equal attention to Nettie, whose development he analyzes according to Winnicott's notion of the "False Self" who wins a "hollow Oedipal victory" in her marriage to Samuel (34).

<sup>5</sup> For Walker's full definition of this term, see In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983) xi-xii. Specific page references to this definition are cited within the text.

Barbara Christian sees The Color Purple "as a further development in the womanist process [Walker] is evolving," and she distinguishes the epistolary style as Walker's primary vehicle for presenting "forbidden" subjects in their content: rape, incest, wife beatings (51). However, Christian reads the term "womanist" as strictly "black feminist" and only offers a brief analysis of the content and form of The Color Purple as exemplary of this "womanist process."

<sup>6</sup> See also "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self," in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens 384-93. Here, Walker describes the admiration of her church congregation when she gave a recitation on Easter Sunday, 1950: "They seem to hold their breath. I can tell they admire my dress, but it is my spirit, bordering on sassiness (womanishness), they secretly applaud: 'That girl's a little mess,' they whisper to each other, pleased" (385; her emphasis).

<sup>7</sup> See especially "Castration or Decapitation," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 7.1 (1981): 41-55.

<sup>8</sup> Walker's use of the term "struggle" carries a double signification in this context, referring to copulation ("Loves love") or to the work for social justice on behalf of the "Folk."

<sup>9</sup> Molly Hite argues that The Color Purple draws upon the "recognizably conventional system of hierarchical relations" encoded in Shakespearean romance but at the same time exposes and subverts "the ideology of racism and patriarchy" which the traditional romance inscribes. See "Romance, Marginality, Matrilineage: Alice Walker's The Color Purple and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Novel 22.3 (1989): 262. Henry Louis Gates detects Walker's "troping" of Zora Neale Hurston's narrative strategy of "free indirect discourse" in Their Eyes Were Watching God. I discuss Gate's argument in the following section of this chapter within the context of Walker's matrilineal focus in The Color Purple. See "Color Me Zora: Alice Walker's (Re)Writing of the Speakerly Text," in Intertextuality and Contemporary Fiction eds. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 148. Mae Henderson claims that Walker's novel "subverts the traditional Eurocentric male code which dominates the literary conventions of the epistolary novel." See The Color Purple: Revisions and Redefinitions in Alice Walker, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1989) 67. But Bell Hooks's oppositional reading of the novel counters readings such as Henderson's: "To say even as some critics do that it is a modern day "slave narrative" or to simply place the work within the literary tradition of epistolary

sentimental novels is also a way to contain, restrict, control." Arguing that even though Walker subverts these conventions, such a reading "implies that the text neither demands nor challenges, rather, that it can be adequately and fully discussed within an accepted critical discourse, one that remains firmly in the boundaries of conservative academic aesthetic intentionality." (See "Writing the Subject: Reading The Color Purple" in Alice Walker, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1989) 215.

<sup>10</sup> Christine Froula refers to "Celie's utopian history" as an allegory of "women's need to be economically independent of men" as well as "the daughter's need to inherit the symbolic estate of culture and language that has always belonged to the father." See "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History," Signs 11.4 (1986): 641. Similar to Hite's reading, Froula notes that the "magical ease with which Celie emerges from poverty and silence classes Walker's 'historical novel' with epic and romance rather than with realist or socialist realist fiction" (641).

In contrast, bell hooks denounces "the perpetuation of bourgeois ideology" accomplished by Celie's transformation at the end of the novel: "Walker creates a fiction wherein an oppressed black woman can experience self-recovery without a dialectical process; without collective political effort; without radical change in society. To make Celie happy she creates a fiction where struggle--the arduous and painful process by which the oppressed work for liberation--has no place." See "Writing the Subject: Reading The Color Purple in Alice Walker, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1989) 227.

<sup>11</sup> I borrow the phrases "site of repression" and "site of resistance" from bell hooks's theoretical writings on marginalization of oppressed groups. Specific references will be cited in subsequent notes.

<sup>12</sup> The phrase "mule of the world" is from Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. Walker uses the same words her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" to explain why her foremothers were prevented from a greater participation in African-American women's cultural production.

<sup>13</sup> In her essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to Jane Eyre as "a cult text of feminism" in her discussion of the political ramifications of the issue of individualism regarding nineteenth-century heroines. I use Spivak's discussion of Jane Eyre to formulate the theoretical backdrop of the final section of this chapter. See Critical Inquiry 12 (1985): 243-61.

<sup>14</sup> A Room of One's Own (1929; New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1957) 25. Further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>15</sup> See In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (San Diego, 1983) 231-43. Further references to this work are cited parenthetically within the text.

<sup>16</sup> Walker credits Wheatley's poetry which "kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, the notion of song" [her emphasis] (237).

<sup>17</sup> I agree with Barbara Christian when she states that "Walker's major insight in this essay is her illumination of the creative legacy of 'ordinary' black women of the South, a focus which complements but finally transcends literary history" (43).

<sup>18</sup> See my introductory remarks about The Color Purple, pages 16-22, where I make a connection between the work of Hortense Spillers on the gender identities of African-American female slaves and Walker's project of constructing an African-American women's cultural tradition from her foremothers' artistic contributions.

<sup>19</sup> See "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Walker and Hurston," Signs 11.1 (1985): 11. Although Sadoff argues against applying theories of authorial dependence such as Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "primary anxiety of authorship" in the case of black women authors, she claims that for Walker "in the face of suffering and a history of oppression, idealized but necessary celebration masks anxiety [in her writing] about cultural disinheritance" (12).

<sup>20</sup> Walker describes her conversion to Hurston's writing as "having committed myself to Zora's work, loving it, in fact." See Walker's essay "Zora Neale Hurston" in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, (San Diego, 1983) 86.

<sup>21</sup> When Walker first discovered Hurston's Mules and Men, she ecstatically proclaims: "Here was the perfect book!" She found this book a model of "racial health [imparting] a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature" [her emphasis]. See "Zora Neale Hurston," In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, (San Diego, 1983), especially pages 84-85.

<sup>22</sup> See "Color Me Zora: Alice Walker's (Re)Writing of the Speakerly Text" in Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction, Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis,

eds. (Baltimore, 1989). Further page references are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>23</sup> For example, among other "thematic echoes" Gates finds that Celie's departure from Albert is effected much like Janie's "declaration of independence" from her husband (159), and that Shug's discourse about nature finds its source in Janie's "lyrical language of the trees" (161).

<sup>24</sup> Gates analyzes Hurston's narrative innovation in Their Eyes Were Watching God as the "bi-vocality of free indirect discourse" wherein "Hurston depicts her protagonist's ultimate moment of self-awareness in her ability to name her own consciousness, divided between speaking and writing" (144). This divided narrative style or "double voicing" serves to indicate "both the formal unity of the Afro-American literary tradition and the integrity of the black subjects depicted in this literature" (144). According to Gates, Walker's innovation in parodying Hurston's narrative style ("a written voice masked as a speakerly voice") is to "represent Celie's growth of self-consciousness as an act of writing," that is, "a spoken or mimetic voice, cast in dialect, yet masked as a written one" (148-49). Gates claims that Walker's use of Hurston's narrative voice "must be the most loving revision, and claim to title, that we have seen in the tradition" (163).

<sup>25</sup> See n. 5 in Gates's essay which reads:

Walker informs me that "All names in Purple are family or Eatonton, Georgia, community names. Kate was my father's mother. In real life she was the model for Aunt Julia (in the novel), my grandfather's "illegitimate" daughter (who in the novel is the wife, but who in real life is the grand-daughter of Albert who in the novel is her father). It was she, Kate, my grandmother, who was murdered by her lover (he shot her) when my dad was eleven. Carrie, an aunt. But [your] version is nice, too, and my version is so confusing. For instance, the germ for Celie is Rachel, my stepgrandmother: she of the poem "Burial" in Revolutionary Petunias."

See "Color Me Zora," Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction, Patrick O'Connell and Robert Con Davis, eds. (Baltimore, 1989) 167.

<sup>26</sup> See Molly Hite "Romance, Marginality, and Matrilineage: Alice Walker's The Color Purple and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Novel 22.3 (1989): 272. Further page references are cited in the text.

<sup>27</sup> See "Writing The Color Purple," In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (San Diego, 1983) 355-360. Further references to this essay are cited within the text. Although Dianne F. Sadoff does not refer to this essay in her study of Hurston and Walker, she acknowledges the fact that "a tradition depends not only on identification with precursors but also on transmission by the belated or second-generation writer to later readers and writers." See "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Walker and Hurston," Signs 11.1 (1985): 6.

<sup>28</sup> Walker appends a postscript to The Color Purple: "AW author and medium." However, Walker does not consistently invoke the term "medium" in her accounts of writing this novel. In fact, the phrases "trying to contact me, to speak through me" are parenthetical to the phrase "were trying to form," a passive construction that suggests both a sense of struggle on the part of the characters who are nevertheless dependent on the "author and medium" and which imparts a sense of the inevitability in their growth and maturation, despite the author's conscious attempt to create them. While Walker seems to elide terms "author" and "medium" in this passage as well as in her postscript, the context of the essay strongly suggests her favoring an extended metaphor of sexual reproduction: Ruth's "germ," the character's "trying to form," and their struggle "to come out." The author as mother figure in this context seems almost overstated to me. Furthermore, the metaphor of "germ" or "seed" also cross references Walker's botanical metaphors which she associates with her foremothers' "creative spark." Walker's rhetorical choices here are consistent with her emphasis on mother/child relations in other essays, and as I argue here, are central to her writing of The Color Purple.

<sup>29</sup> See especially Walker's essays "One Child of One's Own" and "Saving the Life That Is Your Own" to which I refer later in this chapter. The titles of both essays parody Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own" and therefore hint in advance their concern with the recognition of women and their creativity in history. In both essays, furthermore, Walker refers to literal instances of her maternity to underscore her preoccupation with the establishment of a historical tradition of African-American women's cultural production.

<sup>30</sup> See Molly Hite's "Romance, Marginality, Matrilineage: Alice Walker's The Color Purple and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God" in Novel 22.3 (1989): 272.



<sup>31</sup> The Color Purple, (1982; New York: Washington Square, 1983) 181. All further references to The Color Purple will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>32</sup> Before her publication of this essay in her book In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Walker recounts this same episode in an interview with Gloria Steinem, similarly emphasizing Celie's fondness for Rebecca:

"The people in the book were willing to visit me, but only after I stopped interrupting with poetry readings and lectures and getting on some plane," explained Alice. Even more than most novelists, she feels that her characters come alive in her head and walk around on their own. "They took a lot of quiet and attention. For a while when Rebecca first came back from staying with her father, I thought even she might be too much. Then she came home from school one day looking all beat up and said, 'Don't worry, Mom. You should see the other guy!' Right away, Celie liked her."

See "Do You Know This Woman" (Ms., June 1982): 90.

<sup>33</sup> In her essay "A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Her Children," Walker condemns the fact that childrearing is viewed as prosaic and therefore divorced from women's creative activity in the cultural sphere. See In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (San Diego, 1983) 69.

<sup>34</sup> See In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (San Diego, 1983) 361-83. Walker's title, in echoing the title of Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, addresses the problem of childbearing and child rearing in the life of the female artist. Although Woolf's essay acknowledges the burdens of childbearing and mothering, Woolf's final prescription for women's success as writers does not address the conflict between women's reproductive and mothering roles and their productive work as writers.

Walker's complex intertextual essay begins as a paean to Muriel Rukeyser, Walker's former teacher at Sarah Lawrence College, whose concern with the centrality of the child is used as a springboard for Walker's blistering criticism of racial discrimination within the women's movement. See also Marianne Hirsch's commentary on "One Child of One's Own" in her essay "Clytemnestra's Children: Writing (Out) the Mother's Anger" in Alice Walker, Harold Bloom, ed. (London: Chelsea House, 1989) 195-213. Hirsch suggests that Walker's essay describes "the process of identity as a process of shifting affiliation" from her own mother to her daughter, and that this essay charts Walker's "depression that comes with the suppression of anger to the forceful expression that makes anger into an effective

political force" (210-211). Hirsch concludes that this "transformation is intimately connected to her [Walker's] motherhood" (210).

<sup>35</sup> In "One Child of One's Own," Walker states that Meridian took five years to complete. At this time during Rebecca's childhood, Walker further comments: "I feel very little guilt about the amount of time 'taken from my daughter' by my work. I was amazed that she could exist and I could read a book at the same time" (381). It becomes evident, however, that after completing the novel, Walker experiences some ambivalence about the amount of time she emotionally distanced herself from Rebecca while writing:

I felt a pang.

I wrote this self-pitying poem:

Now that the book is finished,  
now that I know my characters will live,  
I can love my child again.

She need sit no longer  
at the back of my mind  
the lonely sucking of her thumb  
a giant stopper in my throat. (381)

Although Walker claims this poem is "as much a celebration as anything" and "of course I'd loved my daughter all along," her fear of becoming "mute" as a writer because of the responsibilities of mothering was overwhelming. This fear is no longer recorded in Walker's experience of writing The Color Purple.

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Hill Collins uses the nomenclature of "bloodmothers" for biological mothers as opposed to models of shared parenting by extended family and community members who fulfill the role as "othermothers." See Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (Perspectives on Gender 2), ed. Kay Deaux et al. (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1990). Bell Hooks has described the radical potential of shared parenting in black communities as subverting the notion of capitalism and private property. See Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (Boston: South End Press, 1984) 144-45.

<sup>37</sup> Lisa Davis provides a sensitive reading of the race and class implications affecting childrearing and mothering in the patriarchal setting of The Color Purple in her essay "An Invitation to Understanding Among Poor Women of the Americas: The Color Purple and Hasta no Verte Jesús Mío, Reinventing the Americas: Comparative Studies of Literature of the United States and Spanish America, Bell Gale Chevigny and Gari Laguardia, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 224-241. Davis emphasizes the "healing potential of women loving and supporting each other" in the novel (233) and Celie's transformation from surrogate mother and drudge in

that her writing affirms her "right to be and of her survival as a poor black woman in a barbarous racist society where her enemies include whites and black men" (225). Christine Froula's argument, which I address at the conclusion of this section, elegantly demonstrates how Walker's women characters deconstruct the novel's gender hierarchies, but Froula's discussion virtually ignores the complicating factors of racism which reinforce patriarchal assumptions in Walker's plot. See "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual violence and Literary History," Signs 11.4 (1986): 621-644.

<sup>38</sup> In "Writing the Color Purple," Walker seems to be aware of this issue when she contemplates how she will balance her writing with her responsibility to her own daughter:

Then school started, and it was time for my daughter to stay with me--for two years.

Could I handle it?

Shug said, right out, that she didn't know. (Well, her mother raised her children.) Nobody else said anything. (At this point in the novel, Celie didn't even know where her children were.)

(359)

Walker's emphatic parenthetical comment about Shug's children pointedly contrasts the corresponding parenthetical reference to Celie's situation in the novel. Despite the fact that Shug makes a conscious decision to leave her children with her parents, both Celie and Shug are abused by the paternal authority in their respective families (though not to the same extent) by being separated from their children.

<sup>39</sup> Patricia Hill Collins points to the racist political agenda behind the 'assignment of "mammy roles" to African-American caretakers of white children:

As the members of African-American families who are most familiar with the skills needed for Black accommodation, Black women are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference behavior many are forced to exhibit in mammy roles. By teaching Black children their assigned place in white power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression. (72)

See Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> See "Writing the Subject: Reading The Color Purple" in Alice Walker, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House, 1989) 227. See also Gerald Early's "The Color Purple As Everybody's Protest Art," The Antioch Review 44.3 (1986): 261-275. Early claims that The Color Purple "fails the ideology it purports to serve" by complying with the "Victorianisms" introduced in the novel instead of employing them subversively. I will address Early's charge in last section of this chapter.

<sup>41</sup> hooks sets forth an elaborate argument explaining why The Color Purple cannot be neatly classified as either an epistolary or slave narrative form. She criticizes Walker's "parody" of both forms in The Color Purple for failing to live up to the radical tradition of the slave narrative, invalidating both its historical context and its racial agenda (224). She further argues that Walker's parodic alignment of the traditional slave narrative in conjunction with the "Eurocentric bourgeois literary traditions" as exemplified by the epistolary novel detracts from the slave narratives's revolutionary agenda and innovation within the African-American literary tradition by suggesting "it was merely derivative and in no way distinct" (224). While I respect Hooks's criticism of Walker, I believe readers will concur that most "innovative" literary forms can trace prior influences and that the slave narrative itself draws upon many historical forms: the secular autobiography, the spiritual confession, as well as the influence of the New Testament epistolary tradition.

I also call attention to the fact that Walker's installation and subversion of both forms fit Linda Hutcheon's description of postmodern literature which I address in my Introduction. Furthermore, Hooks's argument develops a circular logic in that she first condemns critics who compare The Color Purple to a slave narrative, but she, in turn, critiques this novel for not living up to the radical tradition of a slave narrative. Hooks's reading fails to provide alternative explanations for Walker's apparent use of several literary traditions.

<sup>42</sup> The African-American woman's subjectivity in The Color Purple cannot be understood without situating her role as mother in the context of her double subjugation under patriarchy and racial segregation. As Lauren Berlant comments, "gender oppression is neither the only nor the main factor operating in the oppressive paternal ideology" in that "racism succeeds sexism as the cause of social violence" in Walker's novel. See "Race, Gender, and Nation in The Color Purple," 839.

The racist social structure represented in The Color Purple exacerbates women's subjugation under patriarchy, and in their various maternal roles, women become more

vulnerable to forms of violence from both oppressive systems, which threaten to separate them from their children or which often cause them entirely to reject activities associated with motherhood. In this novel, women must often mother other women's children, a task usually carried out under compulsion and often with resentment and little affirmation. Walker's focus on the maternal in The Color Purple is concerned with the representation of mothering as an aspect of women's labor and the historical contradictions which African-American women as mothers have had to endure.

<sup>43</sup> Berlant comments that the lynching of Nettie's and Celie's father "has a structural equivalence to Celie's rape, in its violent reduction of the victim to a 'biological' sign, an exemplum of subhumanity." Furthermore, "the first violation, [Celie's rape], is succeeded by the second and prior act, lynching: a 'logic of equivalence' is installed in the narrative that in effect makes race a synonym for scandalous, transgressive Afro-American sexuality." See "Race, Gender, and Nation in The Color Purple," Critical Inquiry 14 (Summer 1988): 840.

<sup>44</sup> Berlant points out that although this scene remains unrepresented in the text, it becomes an intersection of issues about class, race, and sex:

The store the black men owned took business away from the white men, who then interfered with the free market by lynching their black competitors. Thus, class relations, in this instance, are shown to motivate lynching. Lynching was the act of violence white men performed to racialize--to invoke the context of black inferiority and subhumanity--the victim; the aura of sexual transgression is also always produced around the lynched by the lynchers, white men guarding the turf of their racial and sexual hegemony. (841)

<sup>45</sup> See "Alice Walker's The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text," Black American Literature Forum 22.1 (1988): 81-95.

<sup>46</sup> "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History," Signs 11.4 (1986): 621-44.

<sup>47</sup> See "Writing the Subject: Reading The Color Purple" in Alice Walker, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York, 1989) 226.

<sup>48</sup> Few critical discussions call attention to the complex pattern of sororal relations in the novel whereby women nurture and therefore sustain other women who share maternal responsibilities: Celie-Nettie; Nettie-Corrine;

Corrine-Celie; Celie-Shug; Shug-Mary Agnes; Mary Agnes-Sophia; Sophia-Celie; Eleanor Jane-Sophia.

<sup>49</sup> The complicated web of relations between maternal subjects does not evolve from Celie's narrative position alone. Nettie's letters reveal that her relationship with Corrine is both nurturing and conflictive: she is both daughter to Corrine as well as aunt and surrogate mother to the children who belong to both Celie and Corrine. Therefore, hooks's observations about women in The Color Purple does not completely explain the conflict which ultimately separates Corrine from her children and from Nettie; in fact, Corrine's position as a mother, which I discuss in the following section of this chapter, has largely been ignored in critical discussions about motherhood in The Color Purple.

<sup>50</sup> See Elizabeth Fifer, "Dialect and The Color Purple," in Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies, Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick, eds. (Lexington: UP of Kentucky: 1985) 155-170. See also King-Kok Cheung's "Don't Tell: Imposed Silences in The Color Purple and The Woman Warrior," PMLA 102.2 (1988): 162-74.

<sup>51</sup> See bell hooks's preface to Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (1984) which evolves into an essay "Marginality as Site of Resistance," in Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990) 341-43. Hooks further elaborates upon these ideas of marginality and resistance in "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," in Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics, (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 145-153.

<sup>52</sup> See "Marginality as Site of Resistance," Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990) 341.

<sup>53</sup> See "Alice Walker's Women," in New Orleans Review 12.1 (1985): 33-41. Although I agree with Willis's observation of the double marginalization of women in Walker's fiction, she obviously errs when she generalizes that "all Walker's women are peasants" (40). Willis's assumptions about class in her choice of the term "peasants" are unfortunate since she attributes boorish, rude, or coarse behavior to the novel's women, qualities which more closely resemble men's personalities in The Color Purple. Celie's discourse, which betrays her lack of formal schooling, could hardly be qualified as ignorant. Furthermore, Nettie's social class and race do not condemn her to the status of subaltern, and Corrine's education and more privileged socio-economic background protect her from

many, though not all, of the abuses which Celie, Sofia, and other women in the novel endure.

<sup>54</sup> See "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History," Signs 11.4 (1986): 621-44.

<sup>55</sup> Froula also ignores the fact that Celie's liberation does not depend on Albert's "conversion" to assist in the care of Sofia's child Henrietta. Instead, Celie begins to free herself from the heterosexual constraints that demand her maternal duty long before Albert's conversion by affirming her erotic relationship with Shug and by pursuing economic independence from Albert through her sewing.

<sup>56</sup> bell hooks's very similar essay on history and quilting illustrates her grandmother's insistence on the importance of "sharing the story of a given quilt." See "Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand," in Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 115-22. In this essay, hooks states that "art historians focusing on quilting have just begun to document traditions of black female quiltmakers, to name names, to state particulars" (115-16).

<sup>57</sup> Originally published in Fingering the Jagged Grain (U of Georgia P, 1985), Byerman's essay is reprinted in Alice Walker, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1989) 59-66. See also M. Teresa Tavormina, "Dressing the Spirit: Clothworking and Language in The Color Purple," Journal of Narrative Technique 16.3 (1986): 220-230, for a treatment of how clothing, like language, becomes a means of self-expression in Walker's novel. Mary Jane Lupton also writes that quilting "serves as connection between the sisters [Nettie and Celie] and to a shared African-American heritage" (413). See "Clothes and Closure in Three Novels by Black Women," Black American Literature Forum 20.4 (1986): 409-21.

<sup>58</sup> See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Color Me Zora: Alice Walker's (Re)Writing of the Speakerly Text," Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction, Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis, eds. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 150. Gates is not interested so much in the thematics of Nettie's letters as much as he is concerned with Walker's production of a "speakerly text," that is "the text's justification of its own scene of writing" (151). Viewing Celie as a text herself, Gates analyzes how "Walker manipulates our responses to Celie without even once revealing a voice in the the text that Celie, or Nettie, does not narrate, or repeat, or edit" (153). Gates sees the structural function of Nettie's letters as a frame tale within Celie's story but does not discuss the significance

of a such a frame within the larger frame of Celie's writing. According to Gates, Nettie's letters are completely subordinate to Celie's and "function as a second narrative of the past, echoing the shift from present to past that we see within the time-shifts of Celie's letters" (158-59).

<sup>59</sup> See Hite's summary of representative reviews of The Color Purple which feature negative responses to Nettie's letters in "Romance, Marginality, and Matrilineage: Alice Walker's The Color Purple and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God," 257.

<sup>60</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (London, 1990) 212. Further references are cited within the text.

<sup>61</sup> Collins defines "call-and-response" discourse as "composed of spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements, or 'calls,' are punctuated by expressions, or 'responses,' from the listener" (213).

<sup>62</sup> Walker's presentation of the "friendship" among the Olinka wives of one husband, although understated, is not uncomplicated. The Olinka women survive through a relational economy of cooperation, making the best out of an oppressive situation. Similar to marital relations in Buchi Emecheta's Joys of Motherhood where the husband's taking of a new wife, often a widow of a deceased relative, is encoded into the community's social system as a man's duty, the practice is also a displacement and demeaning of his first wife, who must remain with only one husband through the duration of his life. While wives of one husband will in most cases eventually become friends, their relationship is founded on their continually readjusted understanding of their mutual place of subjection under the authority of the husband "who has life and death power" over his wives (The Color Purple 153).

<sup>63</sup> Marilyn French analyzes the role of institutional religion in what she terms "the systemic discrimination against women," arguing that the American Protestant fundamentalist attack on evolutionary theory is gender-biased in its complicity with patriarchal values:

Fundamentalists also opposed the theory of evolution on grounds that it denied the personhood of the deity (god is a white man) and destroyed morality by degrading human beings to the status of animals or machines, obliterating their responsibility as moral agents. Evolution,



they felt, precluded the existence of free will and thus moral responsibility. Again, to understand their real message, we have to locate the kind of moral responsibility they had in mind, and, of course, it was sexual and gendered. . . . Fundamentalist morality, translated, meant almost solely female behavior: discussions of "morality" treat divorce, crimes committed by women, and girls drinking and smoking.

See The War Against Women (New York, 1992) 60-61.

<sup>64</sup> Luce Irigaray states:

Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women. The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men's "activity"; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers' desire while offering herself as its material support without getting pleasure herself. . . . Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has woman any right to her own pleasure.

See This Sex Which Is Not One (New York: 1985) 186-87.

<sup>65</sup> The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley, 1978) 61.

<sup>66</sup> Chodorow, 61.

<sup>67</sup> David L. Lewis details the migration of African-American churches and cabarets into the Harlem district in the early 1900s, demonstrating how the infusion of capital into the area was responsible for Harlem's dramatic growth. See When Harlem Was in Vogue (New York, 1979), especially pages 25-49. Further references are cited within the text.

<sup>68</sup> The idea of racial uplift, of course, did not originate with Marcus Garvey. Nineteenth-century African-American women writers such as Frances E.W. Harper contradict stereotypically derogatory representations of black persons, especially women, in their writings. In her essay "Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists," Deborah E. McDowell situates the literary production of Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Emma Dunham Kelley in the "revisionist mission" of a larger "movement of racial uplift led by a widespread network of black club women of the nineteenth century whose motto was 'Lifting As We Climb'" (138). See Harold Bloom, ed., Alice Walker (New York: Chelsea House, 1989) 135-151. McDowell argues, however,

that Harper and her contemporaries succeeded only in substituting derogatory stereotypes of black women with superlative but equally unrealistic counter images. Further references to McDowell are cited within the text.

<sup>69</sup> The Color Purple, 127. In this same scene, Walker exposes the Missionary Society's Eurocentrism by creating an ironic distance between the simplicity of Nettie's narrative and her record of the Society's blatant racism:

There is already a white woman missionary not far from our village who has already lived in Africa for the past twenty years. She is said to be much loved by the natives even though she thinks they are an entirely different species from what she calls Europeans. Europeans are white people who live in a place called Europe. That is where the white people down home came from. She says an African daisy and an English daisy are both flowers, but totally different kinds. The man at the Society says she is successful because she doesn't "coddle" her charges. She also speaks their language. He is a white man who looks at us as if we cannot possibly be as good with the Africans as this woman is. (27)

Nettie registers the Society's hypocritical stance by quoting their tacit endorsement of the racist ideology of Doris Baines, the wealthy woman whom Nettie later meets on the voyage from Africa to England. Escaping the confinement of upper-class British society under the guise of religious missionary, Baines is sent to Africa where she is free to pursue her vocation as a novelist. In the quoted passage, the Society is clearly impressed by Baines's social affluence and dismissive attitude toward the African peoples, and Nettie perceives the Society's censure directed toward her race as well as to her social class.

<sup>70</sup> See The Creation of Patriarchy (New York, 1986) 5.

<sup>71</sup> See "History and Will in Dog Soldiers, Sabbatical, and The Color Purple," Arizona Quarterly 43.3 (1987): 212.

<sup>72</sup> See "The Color Purple: Everybody's Protest Art," The Antioch Review 44.3 (1986): 271. Early cites the following Victorian elements in The Color Purple:

the ultimate aim of the restoration of a gynocentric, not patriarchal family; the reunion of lost sisters; the reunion of mother and children; the glorification of cottage industry in the establishment of the pants business; bequests of money and land to the heroine at novel's end; Celie's discovery that her father/rapist is really a cruel stepfather; the

change of heart or moral conversion of Mr. Albert, who becomes a feminized man by the end; the friendship between Shug Avery and Celie, which, despite its overlay of lesbianism. . . is nothing more than the typical relationship between a shy ugly duckling and her more aggressive counterpart. (271)

Further references to this essay are cited within the text.

<sup>73</sup> See In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983) 361-83. Further references to this essay are cited within the text.

<sup>74</sup> Gloria Steinem, "Do You Know This Woman? She Knows You: A Profile of Alice Walker," Ms. June 1982: 91.

<sup>75</sup> See In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens 7-8.

<sup>76</sup> In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens 233.

<sup>77</sup> See also n. 64. Deborah McDowell contends that Walker's Celie is a revision of Harper's Iola Leroy. According to Jean Yellin, the slave narrative of Harriet Ann Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), preceding Iola Leroy, shares a similar conflict between writing about her actual experience of sexual abuse when she was a slave and admitting to her largely white, middle-class readership of women that she became a mother out of wedlock. By creating the persona of Linda Brent, Jacobs "moved her book beyond the limits of genteel nineteenth-century discourse" (1725). See Jean Fagan Yellin, "Harriet Ann Jacobs 1813-1897," in The Heath Anthology of American Literature, ed. Paul Lauter, et. al., 2 vols. (Lexington: Heath, 1990) 1723-25.

<sup>78</sup> See especially "One Child of One's Own" where Walker forcefully challenges the social conventions voiced by her mother concerning marriage and childbirth, advice which she terms "Women's Folly." In her description of the birth of her daughter, she parodies Brontë's address to the "Reader":

(Men have every right to be envious of the womb. I'm envious of it myself, and I have one.) But there she was, coming out, a long black curling lock of hair the first part to be seen, followed by nearly ten pounds of--a human being! Reader, I stared. (368; her emphasis)

Immediately following this description, Walker reverts to her rejection of "Women's Folly":

"But this hymn of praise I, anyhow, have heard before, and will not permit myself to repeat, since there are, in fact, very few

variations, and these have become shopworn and boring" (368).

<sup>79</sup> In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens 49.

<sup>80</sup> See "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," Critical Inquiry 12 (1985): 244. Further references to Spivak's essay are cited within the text.

<sup>81</sup> Jane Eyre (New York: Norton, 1971) 398. Further references are cited parenthetically within the text.

<sup>82</sup> The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1989) 93.

<sup>83</sup> According to Spivak's reading of Jane Eyre, "we encounter, first, the Reeds as the legal family and Jane, the late Mr. Reed's sister's daughter, as the representative of a near incestuous counter-family; second, the Brocklehursts, who run the school Jane is sent to, as the legal family and Jane, Miss Temple, and Helen Burns as a counter family-family that falls short because it is only a community of women; third, Rochester and the mad Mrs. Rochester as the legal family and Jane and Rochester as the illicit counter family" (246-47).

<sup>84</sup> Spivak cites the following description of Bertha Mason from Jane Eyre:

In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not . . . tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (257-58)

<sup>85</sup> See n. 80 for the pertinent passage from Jane Eyre.

<sup>86</sup> McDowell addresses contemporary African-American authors Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, and others who write within a revisionist tradition "to transform the black female literary ideal inherited from their nineteenth-century predecessors" and who "have liberated their own characters from the burden of being exemplary standard-bearers in an enterprise to uplift their race" (Bloom 140).

## CHAPTER 4

### Maternity and the Ideology of Sexual Difference in The Handmaid's Tale

Of all Margaret Atwood's fiction, no single work so explicitly examines the radical marginalization of women within a patriarchal culture as The Handmaid's Tale, yet the dystopian future setting of this novel often distracts critical attention from reading her text as a commentary on contemporary feminist issues, specifically the precarious status of women's reproductive rights.<sup>1</sup> Through her narrator "Offred," who has been pressed into the service of childbearing as a "Handmaid" for the patriarchal state of Gilead, Atwood describes patriarchy's suppression of the gains made by North American women during the twentieth century and their subsequent compulsory return to reproductive and maternal roles as primary determinants of their social status.<sup>2</sup>

With Atwood's theme of enforced maternity in The Handmaid's Tale as a critical focus, the reader more readily discerns those similarities between the future society depicted in the novel and the present social reality of North American women whose freedom to choose abortion or to plan maternity is once again being challenged. Atwood represents the crisis over reproductive rights through the concerns of Gilead's patriarchal rulers who justify

compulsory maternity because of a sharp decline in the North American population, ostensibly from the toxic effects of prolonged environmental pollution as well as from liberalized access to abortion.<sup>3</sup> Although the society represented in the novel has long had access to reproductive technologies, these have been repudiated in favor of a policy of enforced biological maternity, suggesting that the ultimate goal of Gilead's male leaders is their control of women. Therefore, patriarchal authorities in the novel respond to the alleged "crisis" of declining birth rates by institutionalizing surrogate maternity to ensure its male line of successors and to deny potentially rebellious women their former autonomy in deciding whether or not to give birth.

The government of Gilead teaches that maternity is both a sacred event and the primary function of women's sexuality. Therefore, the disruption of pregnancy merits death, and every woman of childbearing age has an obligation to reproduce. In order to contain women within their social role as childbearers, the government conscripts women of childbearing age and trains them as "Handmaids" who are routinely assigned as surrogate mothers to the childless households of elderly Commanders. However, many of the Commanders (as well as their "Wives") are obviously infertile, an inside joke among the successive Handmaids who pass through different Commanders' households without

conceiving a child. Analogous to Biblical patriarchy, this theocratic society does not recognize sterility in men and classifies women as either barren or fruitful. The white and powerfully elite male authority of Gilead assures the continuation of its male lineage by appropriating cultural elements from Old Testament patriarchy to enforce women's maternal function, such as ascribing value to individual women only for their ability to conceive and bear children. The Handmaid's indoctrination occurs at the "Rachel and Leah Training Center," a reference to wives of Old Testament patriarchs. And part of the Handmaid's ritual includes chanting the prayerful refrain, "Give me children, or else I die."<sup>4</sup> The childless woman's echo is derived from Old Testament patriarchal culture which suggests that women are tragically incomplete without the experience of childbirth, a fitting ideological sentiment in the misogynist context of Atwood's novel.

Through their loyalty to particular households, Handmaids earn social privileges and material security, but the social expectation that they produce children undermines any consideration of female autonomy or liberation. Since Wives occupy a more privileged social class than that of the Handmaid, they maintain nominal authority over those women whose sole function is biological reproduction. Wives not only take possession of any Handmaid's offspring, but greater social esteem accrues to those Wives whose

households possess a Handmaid who has successfully given birth to a healthy infant. Therefore, the class hierarchy of all women in the novel is structured around Gilead's patriarchal agenda to enforce women's maternal roles.

As part of the suppression of women's identities in the narrative, the patriarchal ideology of sexual difference that is enforced at the Rachel and Leah training center discourages women's identification with their bodies. This indoctrination forces Offred to admit feeling "shameful, immodest" during her bath, and she avoids looking at her body because it "determines her so much" (63). This masculine logic, which teaches women fear and repulsion of their own bodies, sustains an androcentric culture in that women are denied access to their bodies yet may only experience desire by recognizing themselves as a source of erotic gratification for men.

This masculine ideology of sexual difference is taught by the female "Aunts," the principal trainers at the "Rachel and Leah Center," who preach to the Handmaids about the value of women's chastity and modesty. According to the Aunts' teachings which endorse the repression of a feminine erotics, men's sexual advances toward women are natural, but Handmaids can always control the sexual overtures initiated by men. As Aunt Lydia preaches, she excuses men's sexual abuse of women and shifts their sexual responsibility to women: "They [men] can't help it, she said, God made them



that way but He did not make you that way. He made you different. It's up to you to set the boundaries" (my emphasis; 45).

Aunt Lydia's message is loaded with irony because she depicts men as slaves to their sexuality while women are asked to ignore the sexual power relations of male dominance that remain beyond their control. Aunt Lydia's words reaffirm the license society still seems to give men to harass, seduce, or even rape women, but according to this same essentialist logic, women are "different" in that they supposedly can control sexual desire.

The ideological distinctions between men's and women's sexuality in Atwood's novel are consonant with contemporary critical discussions on sexual difference. Deborah Rhode summarizes three main trends in critical debates on sexual difference:

One strategy has been to deny the extent or essential nature of differences between men and women. A second approach has been to celebrate difference -- to embrace characteristics historically associated with women and demand their equal social recognition. A third, more recent strategy attempts to dislodge difference--to challenge its centrality and its organizing premises and to recast the terms on which gender relations have traditionally been debated.<sup>5</sup>

The ideology of sexual difference preached by the patriarchal government in Atwood's novel teaches that biological factors are responsible for the "essential" differences between men and women and that these differences are what should inform cultural practices involving gender

relations and gender roles. Rhode's first theoretical approach would seek to deny the a priori assumptions of biologism which informs Gilead's gender politics.

In my reading of The Handmaid's Tale, I rely on Luce Irigaray's understanding of sexual difference to analyze the patriarchal ideology represented in Atwood's text. In This Sex Which Is Not One, Irigaray challenges the symbolic order which defines sexual difference according to the masculine parameters of phallomorphism. Because Western metaphysical discourse is constructed upon those binary oppositions which are associated with the privileging of masculine-related concepts (e.g., the "active" as opposed to the feminine "passive"), women's psychosexual being can never be completely represented through the use of terms that negate her genital morphology as passive, hidden, unseen, amorphous, or absent. Irigary's theory would seek to unsettle the metaphysical foundation upon which women's identity is mystified, unrepresented, and devalued. If women's sexuality can only be defined in reference to male sexuality, this logic of dependence would necessarily imply a sexual "indifference" which construes woman merely as man's reflection. By revealing the inconsistencies and gaps in the logic of phallogocentrism, Irigaray seeks to create a new philosophical ground for raising questions about sexual difference. Irigaray's theory would thus conform to Rhode's third type of inquiry which dislodges

conventional assumptions about sexual difference as it "attempts to challenge the deep hold that dualisms continue to exercise on public consciousness and the way that gender draws on such analytic structures" (Rhode 6).

In the following sections of this chapter, I examine The Handmaid's Tale according to the central concepts of Irigaray's discussion of sexual difference. In the first section, "The Erotic and the Maternal," I demonstrate how Gilead's patriarchy institutionalizes sexual indifference by defining women's sexuality only according to "the reproductive-maternal function." Not only is woman's erotic function repressed in Gilead's social order but enforced maternity is also an effective means of containment whereby patriarchy can subjugate women by regulating their sexuality.

In the second section, "The Specular Economy: Woman as Commodity; Woman as Colonial Subject," I relate Irigaray's understanding of phallomorphism to the scopophilic practices of Gilead's government. What Irigaray terms "the predominance of the visual" operates as the colonizing gaze associated with male dominance and which seeks to objectify women, turning them into commodities for male exchange.

In section three, "Retraversing the Specular Economy: Atwood's use of Postmodern Parody," I compare Irigaray's subversive strategy of "retraversal" (which challenges the dominance of phallogocentric discourse) to Linda Hutcheon's

theory of postmodern parody as a political narrative strategy. In the scopie economy represented in Atwood's novel, the convex mirror and its reflection of masculine power in the convex shape of the pregnant Handmaid become metaphors for repression of the feminine or erotic function of women. Since both Hutcheon's and Irigaray's theories share a common strategy of mimicry, I demonstrate how Atwood's parody of John Ashbery's Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror foregrounds then subversively parodies the scopie economy which Irigaray seeks to subvert.

In the concluding section, "The Mother as Vanishing Point in the Perspective of Patriarchal History," I trace Atwood's thematics of visual perspective to demonstrate how the maternal is erased from the masculine perspective of history in the "Historical Notes" which conclude Atwood's novel.

## I

### The Maternal and the Erotic

A reader confronting the social implications of the political and sexual disfranchisement of women in The Handmaid's Tale might find it helpful to begin with Luce Irigaray's own guarded commendation of women's movements during the latter half of this century:

Of course, certain things have been achieved for women, in large part owing to the liberation movements: liberalized contraception, abortion, and so on. These gains make it possible to raise again, differently, the question of what the social status of women might be -- in particular through its differentiation from a simple reproductive - maternal function. But these contributions may always just as easily be turned against women. (128)<sup>6</sup>

In the sobering final reflection of this passage, Irigaray suggests that social gains for women within an enclosed system of male power relations will be largely qualified to the extent that women's movements support or threaten a patriarchal agenda. Irigaray argues that in contemporary society, "women cannot yet speak, in this connection, of a feminine politics, but only of certain conditions under which it may be possible" (128). Since Irigaray views liberation movements within the context of her analysis of phallogocentrism, she critiques what she calls the "masculine economy of sameness" or discursive logic that erases sexual difference "in systems that are self-representative of a masculine subject" (74).

For Irigaray, sexual difference, determined in Western culture by the possession of the penis, cannot truly exist in a patriarchal society. If women's difference is only constructed through negative terms, in other words, by that which she does not have, then the meaning of the feminine will always resist or frustrate symbolic representation. According to Carole-Anne Tyler, the absence of the penis/phallus "suggests to Irigaray that the symbolic is

actually nothing other than a masculine imaginary, characterized by a phallocentric scopic economy that the feminine look as masquerade sustains."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, masculine constructions of the feminine only reflect an illusory sexual difference as they mirror man's "imaginary wholeness by representing the lack in his being that he has denied and projected on to her" (Tyler 194). According to Irigaray's theory, the social enforcement of women's maternal function consolidates patriarchal culture by subverting her potentially liberating feminine or erotic function. Since ideas of the feminine "are never affected except by and for the masculine" (132), Irigaray's exploration of a feminine erotics as an experience of woman's difference through "self-affection" becomes a way in which women can speak for themselves without the constraints of the symbolic order, that is, politically.

Therefore, Irigaray's investigation of a distinctly feminine erotics controverts Freud's opinion that "the libido is necessarily male" and that this singular libido in relation to femininity only serves women's "passive aims" (48). Taking issue with Freud's view that "the sexual function" of women "is above all the reproductive function," Irigaray argues that woman is socially coerced to privilege her reproductive capacity and thus to discover "the capstone of her libidinal evolution in the desire to give birth" (41). Irigaray therefore asks what more can be said of

woman's pleasure outside the parameters of "sexual indifference" articulated by Freud and his followers: "Might feminine sexuality have its own specificity?" (69).<sup>8</sup>

Crucial to understanding Irigaray's critique of the symbolic order is her analysis of the violent oppositional logic from which masculine conceptual thought has created cultural constructions of the feminine. For example, Irigaray argues that given the more or less exclusive attention paid to "erection in Western sexuality" in avoidance of the female imaginary, heterosexuality represents a violation of female autoerotic pleasure, and women are "left with the impossible alternative between a defensive virginity. . . and a body open to penetration that no longer knows . . . the pleasure of its own touch" (24). This dualism between the sexes, created "by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks," becomes socially enacted within the polarization of gender roles which devalue woman's desire or erotic pleasure and consequently privileges her maternal function.

Irigaray's description of women's genital morphology as "self-caressing" or contiguous argues in defense of a uniquely feminine erotics in contradistinction to male sexual pleasure which requires mediation ("his hand, a woman's body, language") (24). Irigaray's comparison, often hastily dismissed as essentialist, is biologicistic only in reference to the heterosexual intercourse that she equates

with violation. But her morphological descriptions are important metonymical devices for dismantling what she terms the "dominant phallic economy" that preserves masculine cultural values.<sup>9</sup> This auto-erotic experience, "essentially" different from man's mediated sexual pleasure, provides woman a vantage point "within herself" for establishing a feminine economy since "she is already two-- but not divisible into one(s)" (24). According to Irigaray, however, the plurality of woman's sexual pleasure" is denied by a civilization that privileges phallomorphism":

The value granted to the only definable form excludes the one that is in play in female autoeroticism. The one of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning. . . . supplants, while separating and dividing, that contact of at least two (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched. (26)

This privileging of phallomorphism in Western culture delegitimizes "the autoerotic pleasure [woman] finds in touching herself" (24), since her genital morphology is misrecognized as "the horror of nothing to see" (26). The masculine economy therefore eroticizes women by endorsing only those notions of the feminine that reflect and sustain phallomorphism, reducing "all others" to what Irigaray terms an "economy of the Same."<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, a persistent active/passive dualism, one among many of the conceptual polarities inherent in Western metaphysical thinking, also underlies the masculinist



division of female erotic pleasures into the clitoral and the vaginal, privileging "one pleasure" at the expense of the other. Maternity, aligned with the vaginal-passive function, thus "fills the gap in a repressed female sexuality" (27). Precisely because woman's sexual pleasure is confined neither to the clitoris nor the vagina alone but to a "multiplicity of genital erogenous zones," masculine thinking, according to Irigaray, would seek a standardization of women's sexuality through compliance with a strictly heteroerotic economy.

Irigaray's critique of Freud demonstrates the complicity of his psychoanalytic thought with phallic models of philosophical discourse. As an instance of a patriarchal "discourse of truth," Freudian logic is only one example of discursive thinking that posits "the feminine" only "within models and laws devised by male subjects." Thus Freudian theory would have woman "find fulfillment only in motherhood," that is, in the literal as well as symbolic reproduction of the male sex (87). Irigaray would describe this emphasis as "an economy and an ideology of (re)production" which ultimately marks "[women's] subjection to man's desire" (64). Irigaray concludes that it is no wonder that patriarchy privileges the maternal function "over the more specifically erotic function in woman" (64).

Irigaray's theoretical inquiry is a provocative point of departure in reading The Handmaid's Tale because Atwood

magnifies many social aspects of patriarchy which allude to the possibility of a feminine erotics outside the masculine imaginary. For example, the novel opens with an articulation of feminine desire within the context of a strict heterosexual social order that cannot contain or fulfill such desire. When Offred begins her personal narrative by describing her forced confinement to a gymnasium where she and other Handmaids are being trained in the service of biological reproduction, her recollection of "the watching girls" who were once present at "the games that were formerly played there" already evokes an active/passive dualism between male competitors and a female audience whose relationship reinforces the conventions of a heterosexual economy which eroticizes dominance (3-4).<sup>11</sup>

Offred associates the gymnasium with memories of the "forlorn wail" of dance music, suggesting both sexual desire as well a more generalized sensation of painful longing:

There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name.

I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then, in the small of the back, or out back, in the parking lot, or in the television room with the sound turned down and only the pictures flickering over lifting flesh.

We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the air, and it was still in the air, an afterthought, as we tried to sleep. (3-4)

In this passage, Atwood unmistakably represents a heterosexual economy which never quite contains feminine

desire since Offred's yearning surpasses the heterosexual activity in which she participates. Just as Offred remembers this indefinable yearning as "insatiable," she refers to her present experience of tactile deprivation during her daily regimen at the Rachel and Leah training center as a desperate "hunger to commit the act of touch" (7).

Atwood reiterates this topic of women's suppressed desire when Offred contemplates her daily confinement to her bedroom in the Commander's house. As she notices the refracted sunlight illuminating a small braided rug on the bedroom floor, she associates this item of household decor with her unfulfilled desire:

This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values. Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want? (7)

Atwood does not idly correlate Offred's thoughts on women's containment and the suppression of their erotic pleasure with domestic art. The braided rug is traditionally considered a woman's craft, and the suggestive pun (handmade/handmaid) also represents activity which occupies women's time in domestic service. To question such activity is to admit desire and to waste time, according to the patriarchal values that have imprisoned her. The reference to the folk aphorism "waste not, want not" reminds her that while she is "not being wasted" in Gilead's effort to

reproduce the patriarchal state, her despair underscores the punitive imposition of maternity which she equates with the state's ideology of the "return to traditional values." Furthermore, Offred's parodic echo of Freud is apparent in the question "Why do I want?" which denotes both a denial of autonomy and her self-doubt about her own experience of desire.<sup>12</sup> As a Handmaid, Offred's sexual desire and yearning for autonomy cannot be directly acknowledged since she is not allowed the status of subject in a social order that only recognizes and gratifies male dominance.

In this respect, The Handmaid's Tale can be read as a questioning of radical feminism's capacity to transform society. Radical feminism locates women's oppression primarily in the sexual division of labor and responds to this imbalance of power by advocating a "womanculture" to free women from "forced motherhood and sexual slavery."<sup>13</sup> Since women receive no compensation for their reproductive labor, patriarchy does not acknowledge their agency in the economic realm or in the social and symbolic order that supports it. This is why Offred's gynecologist can draw a curtain between her head and her torso when she is being examined, and this scene becomes a graphic example of Hélène Cixous's understanding of the "decapitation" of women by patriarchy.<sup>14</sup> Offred's mother, a pro-feminist activist prior to the Gilead regime, is a prototype of the radical feminist in her work on behalf of women's reproductive

freedom and in her "woman-identified" lifestyle. She counters the masculine logic of sexual indifference in her view that "a man is just a strategy for making other women" (121).

While Offred's mother perfectly adheres to a radical feminist agenda in her politics of sexual separatism, her conflict also demonstrates patriarchy's measured tolerance for her activism and that of other women who demonstrate in "Take Back the Night" rallies and "pro-choice" campaigns. Radical feminism's resistance to patriarchy in The Handmaid's Tale is represented as diffuse forces (women's coalitions) fighting a greater force (the patriarchy). According to Josephine Logan's understanding of the pervasiveness of patriarchy, it is practically impossible to fight patriarchy outside of the patriarchal system itself, since "patriarchy at present reproduces itself in both its supportive and its resistive elements" (her emphasis).<sup>15</sup> In describing the historical suppression of women's movements as affecting all women, Logan states that "women have to an extent been alienated from experiences appropriate to their experience as women" (78). Patriarchy's suppression of radical feminism in The Handmaid's Tale destroys the women's culture which Offred's mother worked to build, and as a result, effectively reproduces itself by separating Offred from both her mother and from her daughter. Although Offred shares many of the

benefits of her mother's feminist beliefs during the pre-colonization history of the novel, her narrative outlines the end of the second wave of feminism and the repeal of all women's rights under the Gilead regime. In fact, the novel is a sobering depiction of how quickly the gains of radical feminism might be eradicated when the patriarchal order becomes sufficiently threatened.<sup>16</sup> In the society of Gilead, women like Offred's mother are eventually exiled to toxic waste dumps outside the city and branded as "Unwomen."

Because Offred has no alternative between her compulsory reproductive function and the alternative of an agonizing death as an "Unwoman," her anxiety about fecundity and maternity overdetermine her narrative. Offred's description of an egg served to her at breakfast offers a rare pleasure which nevertheless betrays her subconscious fear of her possible inability to conceive a child:

The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by the sunlight, like craters on the moon. It's a barren landscape, yet perfect; it's the sort of desert the saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what god must look like: an egg. The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside.

The egg is glowing now, as if it had an energy of its own. To look at the egg gives me intense pleasure.

The sun goes and the egg fades.

I pick the egg out of the cup and finger it for a moment. It's warm. Women used to carry such eggs between their breasts, to incubate them. That would have felt good.

The minimalist life. Pleasure is an egg. . . . If I have an egg, what more can I want?

(110-111)

As a barren landscape or ascetic hermitage, the repressed feminine economy can only be represented in terms of the masculine imaginary, like the egg whose surface Offred compares to the wilderness habitat of the desert Fathers of Christian tradition. Trapped in the masculine economy of the symbolic order, woman's sexual identity as defined according to the reproductive function can be described metonymically as "an egg." Just as Aunt Lydia encourages the Handmaids to "think of yourselves as seeds" (18), her metonymic reference restricts women's sexuality to biological reproduction. The inside/outside or surface/depth oppositions Offred contemplates about the moon-like surface of the egg are the same dichotomies she must overcome in patriarchy's consideration of women as containers, chalices, and vessels: "The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside." Because Handmaids are only viewed functionally as wombs, they are forbidden the use of facial cream because "we are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut" (96). According to the patriarchal logic that defines the Handmaid, women's sexuality consists only of their reproductive systems. Therefore, Offred's meditation represents women's only possible sexual pleasure as "incubation." As a result of this logic, Offred offers a "minimalist" view of feminine pleasure as defined by the

masculine imaginary: "If I have an egg, what more can I want?" Her question should be seen as another obvious parody of Freud's "What does woman want?"

Preoccupied by the anxiety to reproduce, Offred is overwhelmed by signs fertility and pregnancy throughout her daily regimen. When she leaves the Commander's house on her way to celebrate another Handmaid's childbirth, Offred notices the "gravid smell of earth and grass fills the air" (my emphasis; 111). As the Handmaids assemble to witness the birth, Offred describes the "smell of matrix" in the birthing room and "the soft chanting [that] envelops us like a membrane" (123). The metaphorical birth sac surrounding the women who sympathetically lactate with the birth mother seems to imply solidarity among the Handmaids: "We grip each other's hands, we are no longer single" (125). However, the ecstatic frenzy of the Handmaids during the birthing celebration only reinforces the ideological programming of Gilead's patriarchy, and the women's catharsis of participating in the birth event is nothing more than a short-lived illusion. Offred's narrative dispels this illusion of unity by implying that the "spiked grape juice" indeed contributes to this sense of catharsis: "We too need our orgies" (125). And as the Handmaids are singly transported home "without emotion now, almost without feeling," they are confronted with their destitution: "Each of us holds in her lap a phantom, a ghost baby. What



confronts us, now the excitement's over, is our own failure" (127).<sup>17</sup> At this point, Offred can only think of her mother and ask ironically: "Mother, . . . you wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (127).

Overwhelmed by the necessity to conceive a child for her own survival, Offred describes the hallway leading from her room to the outdoor garden as female reproductive organs. Offred, inscribed as an ovum or "seed" by Aunt Lydia, travels down the "dusty pink" runner that carpets the hallway (8). Atwood's meticulous descriptive attention to this passageway, here and in other scenes, evokes the image of a fallopian tube: "the long space glows gently pink" (97). As Offred exits the house, she walks along a path where the "damp grass" is "like a hair parting . . . the air humid" (17). Atwood finalizes the description with unmistakable references to women's genitalia: "Here and there are worms, evidence of the fertility of the soil, caught by the sun, half dead: flexible and pink, like lips" (17). The ovulation cycle suggested in this description is completed by Offred's mention of the red tulips that remind her of blood, "a darker crimson towards the stem," that seem to "have been cut and are beginning to heal there" (12). The suggestive reference to menstrual blood which completes the fertility cycle reminds Offred of her "failure" and impending doom in Gilead.

Offred's desperation to become pregnant also forces her to meditate on the Commander's Wife, Serena Joy, whose gown of embroidered flowers are actually "the genital organs of plants" and therefore an anachronism for the aging woman. When Offred finds Serena viciously "snipping off the seedpods" of flowers in her garden, she wonders if it is "some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body" (153). Past her childbearing years, Serena is entrapped by her prescribed role as a Wife in Gilead's program of enforced maternity. Her erotic function denied by her husband, Serena suffers from a repressed sexuality which finds expression in the destruction of fruiting "bodies," a vicarious form of revenge on the Handmaid who has supplanted her.

Offred recognizes "something subversive about this garden. . . a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, as if to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently. A Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid, a return of the word swoon" (153). At this point, Offred's thoughts of Serena's garden manifest a sensuous textuality, and the repeated hissing of the sibilants in her poetical description adds a lush tonal quality that breaks the imposition of her silence:

The willow is in full plumage and is no help, with its insinuating whispers. Rendezvous, it says, terraces; the sibilants run up my spine, a shiver as if in fever. The summer dress rustles against the flesh of my thighs, the grass grows underfoot, at the edges of my eyes there are

movements, in the branches; feathers, flittings, grace notes, tree into bird, metamorphosis run wild. Goddesses are possible now and the air suffuses with desire. Even the bricks of the house are softening, becoming tactile. . .It's amazing what desire can do. (155)

Offred's description attests to a competing erotic economy which momentarily eclipses her anxiety over her mandate to reproduce. Read according to Irigaray's theoretical interrogation of phallogocentrism, Offred's meditation is subversive in its affirmation of feminine sexuality as an irrepressible erotic function.

Both Atwood and Irigaray seem to maintain a degree of skepticism about women's ability to effect their complete liberation from or transformation of patriarchal social structures. Atwood's novel suggests radical feminism's vulnerability in that women have no collective material assets that would provide protection against the economic usurpation that individual women experience in Gilead. More importantly, the narrative demonstrates how military force coupled with the patriarchal domination of a national economy reinforce male power relations and fortify government against attacks by organized women's groups. In this respect, Atwood's novel illuminates the fact that women in contemporary society are not sufficiently entrenched in the deep political and economic structures that comprise power relations on various governmental levels.

Atwood's theory of the politics of "victimization" offers women little in the way of encouragement for an

immediate social transformation of patriarchal society. In her assessment of the colonial subject in Canadian literature, Atwood identifies four "Basic Victim Positions": denial, rationalization, repudiation, and creativity.<sup>18</sup> According to Atwood, these "victim positions" may be applied to any colonial subject, whether that victim is a country, a group, or an individual. However, women as colonial subjects can never assume the fourth position of creativity (that is, exist beyond victimization) unless they abandon society completely. Atwood writes that at most, a woman can

recognize the source of her oppression; express anger; suggest ways for change. What she cannot do is to write as a fully liberated individual-as-woman-in-society. She can't do that, as part of the society, until the society is changed.  
(Second Words, 145)

As a colonial subject, Offred fully recognizes "the source of her oppression" and its restraining effect on her self expression. Forbidden participation in any form of public discourse, Offred privately affirms her experience of sensual pleasure in Serena's garden by composing an erotic text that defies male constraints.

While Atwood admits hope of social change and her novel seems to leave open the possibility of transforming systems of dominance, Irigaray would perhaps maintain a greater skepticism since she admits no practical alternative to the masculine symbolic order whose discourse sustains patriarchal social structures and their power relations.

For Irigaray, social change is a moot issue unless the predominance of the reproductive-maternal function over the erotic function of women is subverted. Only then can a genuine feminine identity emerge that is free of masculine parameters:

How can I say it? That we are women from the start. That we don't have to be turned into women by them, labeled by them, made holy and profaned by them. That that has always already happened without their efforts. And that their history, their stories, constitute the locus of our displacement. (212)

Offred's defiance in constructing a pleasurable imaginary garden within the parameters of Gilead testifies to a genuine and creatively disruptive femininity that momentarily rejects the patriarchal script which defines her.

## II

### The Specular Economy:

#### Woman as Commodity; Woman as Colonial Subject

In her discussion of masculine and feminine sexual economies, Irigaray contends that female autoeroticism is a "pleasure denied by a civilization that privileges phallomorphism" (26). Women are victimized by the arbitrary division of their sexuality into erotic and maternal

functions in a culture that romanticizes maternity and represses feminine desire. Since women's genital morphology represents only "the negative, the underside, the reverse of the only visible and morphologically designatable organ," the concept of a feminine sexuality remains subject to mystification:

She is neither one nor two. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two. She resists all adequate definition. Further, she has no "proper" name. And her sexual organ, which is not one organ, is counted as none. (26)

Women's reproductive function, on the other hand, has been appropriated by patriarchal ideology in order to cultivate and sustain social systems of male dominance.<sup>19</sup> Estranged from "the value of her own desire," women never fully claim or enjoy their feminine (erotic) function, and instead, participate in a less pleasurable sexual economy that requires her to masquerade her "femininity" according to masculine ideas of desire: "woman [becomes] only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies" (25). This is why Irigaray claims that "maternity fills the gaps in a repressed female sexuality" (27).<sup>20</sup>

The fact that sexual difference has traditionally been determined by the presence or absence of the penis/phallus provokes Irigaray to consider a host of dualistic concepts which privilege phallomorphism and which subtend symbolic discourse: presence/absence, one/many, form/formlessness, visible/invisible, outside/inside. For Irigaray, the terms

comprising these dualisms actually exist in a relational hierarchy in the masculine sexual imaginary, distinguishing it as a "specular" economy to the extent that it privileges presence, form, and the visual. As for the feminine sexual economy operating within this logic, "the predominance of the visual, and of the discrimination and individualization of form, is particularly foreign to female eroticism" (25-26). By designating masculine sexuality as a "specular economy," Irigaray refers concurrently to symbolic thinking ("speculation"), the "speculative" enterprise of patriarchal relations whereby men exchange women, and the "specular" activity of the "male gaze" which sustains phallocentrism.<sup>21</sup> As for women's sexuality in this economy, she becomes a fetish, that is, eroticized for male pleasure, and her masquerade of "femininity" operates like a mirror that reflects and reinforces male narcissism.

Irigaray's understanding of how phallogentric scopophilia reinforces patriarchal culture helps explain why Atwood exaggerates the scopic functions that support (and literally reflect) the patriarchal power relations represented in The Handmaid's Tale. Within the novel's fundamentalist theocratic government, the logo of the "winged eye" carries religious connotations as a trademark for the regime of Gilead.<sup>22</sup> Appearing on uniforms and banners to denote the patriarchal power relations of the government, the winged eye signifies the divine omniscience

of Gilead's male God, whose religious strictures are enforced by various hierarchies of police-state functionaries: "Guardians" and "Angels," suggestive of the guardian angel, maintain vigilance over Gilead while the "Eyes" enforce the country's laws through surveillance and secret-police fear tactics. This institutionalization of a phallogentric scopophilia is apparent in the state motto, "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro over all the earth."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Handmaids are instructed to signal their allegiance to Gilead by endorsing its male-dominated monotheocracy in their daily greeting, "Under his eye." Through the use of this phrase, Atwood depicts male hegemony as secured by women's participation in their own subordination to men's ways of seeing and by women's acknowledgment that their thoughts and actions are always subject to male scrutiny.

Reflecting the symbolic power of the winged logo, Handmaids wear the compulsory winged headgear which serves a dual function: "The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (8). While Offred's description of her headgear suggests that the patriarchal society has protected Handmaids from the violence of eroticization peculiar to a scopic economy, Handmaids have been only superficially cloaked to preserve a masculine illusion of purity, that is, woman as the "chaste vessel" set aside solely for the reproductive



function. Therefore, the Handmaids' wings serve only the punitive function of confinement:

Given our wings, our blinkers, it's hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasps. (30)

Atwood's use of synaesthesia is particularly effective here in emphasizing both women's social restriction by patriarchy and the phallogentric devaluation of feminine sexuality: "to see the world in gasps" connotes not only the Handmaid's highly restricted view of her surroundings but also suggests the literally stifling and sexually repressive effect of their nun-like habits. Their red cloaked gowns, inspired by "the uniforms of German prisoners of war in Canadian 'POW' camps of the Second World War era," maintain the Handmaids' public visibility and visually mark their reproductive function in the scopic economy of Gilead (307). When Offred contemplates escape, she hesitates because "red is so visible" (292).

Socially contained by their reproductive function and forbidden to speak in public, Handmaids conform to social behavior patterns like those of children reared under the authoritarian premise that they should always be seen but never heard. In adhering to their child-like status in submission to Commanders and their Wives within individual households, Handmaids participate in a suggestively incestuous ritual which sexually contains both Wives and

Handmaids under the Commanders' paternal authority. In addition, the red hue of the Handmaid's garments signifies the social stigma of prostitution, a humiliation which Offred euphemistically refers to as her "reduced circumstances" (8). Offred also recognizes the color she wears as a sign of fecundity, and menstrual blood becomes associated with the sacrifice of women who are conscripted as Handmaids to reproduce for the state: "the color of blood, which defines us" becomes the visible marker of Handmaids whose identities are simultaneously caught up in a variety of subjugating roles as prisoners, prostitutes, and surrogate mothers.

Like the Handmaids who wear red to signify their reproductive function in society, other women in the novel are also marked according to their social roles by the visual determinants of style and color of their dress: "Wives" of ruling class men wear blue; "Marthas," usually older women servants within Commanders' households, wear dull green; and "Econowives" wear "striped dresses. . .cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men" (24). The "Aunts," who operate the training center where Handmaids are processed, represent a quasi-military class of women and dress appropriately in police-style uniforms.<sup>24</sup> Thus, women's clothing in The Handmaid's Tale calls attention to the obvious class differences among women, based on their affiliation within masculine hierarchies of power. More

importantly, Atwood depicts patriarchy's construction of a visually recognizable female social order centered around what Irigaray terms the reproductive-maternal function. In contrast to women's strict dress codes, men's roles are signified by the functions they fulfill, not according to the visual determinants of color: Commanders, Guardians, Eyes, Angels. By contrasting men's active roles to women's passivity as it is strictly organized around the reproductive and maternal functions, Atwood constructs sexual difference in this novel in much the same way that Irigaray's theory would articulate it: women's identities and desires are suppressed by a discourse and social system that forces them to wear femininity as a mask (27).<sup>25</sup>

Atwood, however, goes a step further than Irigaray by dividing the reproductive-maternal function into three separate categories: "Wives" appropriate the Handmaid's children after birth, technically fulfilling the maternal function; Handmaids are only held responsible for conception and successful delivery of the offspring (as seen in their birthing rituals), thus fulfilling their reproductive function. Since "Marthas" carry out primarily domestic responsibilities, they nevertheless assist in the reproduction of patriarchy through their practical support of Handmaids and Wives, enacting the traditional role of housewife whose value has always been ignored in patriarchal analyses of wage labor. And since women's erotic function

falls outside the concerns of Gilead's acceptable feminine social roles, Atwood's representation of patriarchy would agree with Irigaray's theory of a masculine economy wherein maternity becomes a substitute for female desire (27).

Arguably, all the women of Gilead are fetishized to the extent that they are compelled to take part in patriarchy's narcissistic obsession with its own reproduction, but these reproductive-maternal roles, the only socially acceptable roles for women in Gilead, are prescribed for women by a masculine economy to completely exclude the possibility of a genuinely feminine erotics. Instead, women in The Handmaid's Tale become victims of masculine eroticization, which finds its fullest expression in the socially marginalized sub-class of women prostitutes who are detained at Jezebel's, a private social club for the elite men of Gilead. When the Commander arranges a clandestine outing to Jezebels with Offred, he disguises her to fit in with the other prostitutes by dressing her in one of their sordid costumes, "antique and bizarre," which remind her of something from the past. These worn, "bedraggled" costumes with rabbit ears and limp plumes seem out of place to Offred who is both amused and stunned by the erotic surrealism of Jezebels in the midst of the sexually repressive puritan theocracy of Gilead. Seeing her own as well as the other women's costumes for what they are, that is, as masquerades of femininity from a masculine perspective, Offred inquires:

"How can this bedraggled costume appeal?" (239). In other words, Offred asks how women can find sexual pleasure in masquerading as men's idea of the erotic. Offred's statement endorses Irigaray's theory of a masculine economy in which women's sexual difference is unrecognizable because a man looks at a women only expecting to see a reflection of himself. When another man at the club fails to notice anything unusual about her accompanying the Commander, Offred comments with noticeable relief: "My disguise performs its function" (236).

The Commander, defending the male privilege behind the club's existence, states that "Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy (237). Ironically, the Commander appeals to Nature to defend the practice of sexually subjugating women for the purpose of satisfying men's allegedly varied sexual appetites. Since "Nature" is traditionally associated with the feminine as opposed to the masculine "culture" which would seek "to conquer" or subdue the feminine, the Commander's rationalization of his sexual license as "natural" attempts to deflect attention from his actual purpose, which is to maintain power and control over women's sexuality. In his pathetic and obviously paranoid confession to Offred that women used "to trick men into thinking they were several different women" by simply changing clothes, the Commander is more than vaguely aware

that the masculine ruse of sexual indifference, perpetuated by the feminine masquerade, is vulnerable to women's subversion. Offred's reply to the Commander acknowledges that Gilead's patriarchal elite maintains the masquerade of femininity for their own pleasure, but under highly controlled and repressive conditions: "'So now we don't have different clothes,' I say, 'you merely have different women.' This is irony, but he doesn't acknowledge it" (237).<sup>26</sup>

According to Irigaray, "[woman's] sex is heterogenous to this whole economy of representation," that is, the feminine masquerade (152). The masculine economy of sexual indifference sees woman only as "the otherness of sameness," thus nurturing male narcissism in its desire for self-reflection. Therefore, Irigaray also calls attention to the specular economy as a self-enclosed or self-referential economy and provokingly asks how man ever knows anything of himself if he can only refer back to himself to gain knowledge. What Irigaray describes is a kind of blindness or a "blindspot" in the "old [Freudian] dream of symmetry." In The Handmaid's Tale, this fact of blindness in the masculine imaginary is why Offred describes the Commander's penis as a blind slug:

To have them [women] putting him on, trying him on, trying him out, while he himself puts them on, like a sock over a foot, onto the stub of himself, his extra sensitive thumb, his tentacle, his delicate, stalked slug's eye, which extrudes, expands, winces, shrivels back into himself when

touched wrongly, grows big again, bulging a little at the tip, traveling forward as if along a leaf, into them, avid for vision. To achieve vision in this way, this journey into a darkness that is composed of women, a woman, who can see in darkness while he himself strains blindly forward. (87-88)

Despite the fact that her vision is physically restricted by the Handmaid's habit, Offred presents this paradox; as "a woman who can see in darkness," Offred sees the blindness of patriarchal speculation whose logic is self-limiting by its inability to see the feminine.

Irigaray states that because feminine sexuality "does not postulate oneness, or sameness, or reproduction, or even representation," it exists "somewhere else other than in that general repetition where it is taken up only as the otherness of sameness" (152). This "general repetition" which Irigaray denotes as "sameness," the effect of a masculine economy of representation, occurs in Atwood's narrative as a visual phenomenon produced by rows of identical Handmaids in procession:

Late afternoon, the sky hazy, the sunlight diffuse but heavy, and everywhere, like bronze dust. I glide with Ofglen along the sidewalk; the pair of us, and in front of us another pair, and across the street another. We must look good from a distance: picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze, like a shelf full of period-costume ceramic salt and pepper shakers, like a flotilla of swans or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation. Soothing to the eye, the eyes, the Eyes, for that's who this show is for.  
(212)

This aesthetic effect of the continuous reproduction of identical Handmaids is one of Atwood's images for addressing the masculine economy of sexual indifference.

This repetition or reproduction of "sameness" is also clearly identified with male scopic pleasure. Notice the similar pleasure which Offred attributes to the phallic Aunt Lydia who enjoys seeing Handmaids at the "Red Center" as they pray in file and in unison:

No longer kneeling at the foot of the bed, knees on the hard wood of the gym floor, Aunt Elizabeth standing by the double doors, arms folded, cattle prod hung on her belt, while Aunt Lydia strides along the rows of kneeling nightgowned women, hitting our backs or feet or bums or arms lightly, just a flick, a tap, with her wooden pointer if we slouch or slacken. She wanted our heads bowed just right, our toes together and pointed, our elbows at the proper angle. Part of her interest in this was aesthetic: she liked the look of the thing. She wanted us to look like something Anglo-Saxon, carved on a tomb, or Christmas card angels, regimented in our robes of purity. But she knew too the spiritual value of bodily rigidity, of muscle strain: a little pain cleans out the mind, she'd say.

(emphasis mine; 194)

Atwood inflects both of these passages with Offred's awareness of herself as an object of visual pleasure from a masculine perspective. Irigaray would read these passages as scenes of masculine "specula(riza)tion,"<sup>27</sup> in that women, rather than representing sexual difference in a masculine scopic economy, instead serve as men's mirrors (or sexual same), endlessly fortifying and reduplicating men's illusion of wholeness and dominance against his perception of her incompleteness and inferiority. As Carole-Anne



Tyler has stated: "In the masculine imaginary woman's real difference is unsymbolized, misrecognized as lack" (194). This is why Irigaray sees women's social construction as man's mirror a futile and debilitating role: "A (scarcely) living mirror, she/it is frozen, mute. More lifelike. The ebb and flow of our lives spent in the exhausting labor of copying, miming. Dedicated to reproducing -- that sameness in which we have remained for centuries, as other" (This Sex, 207).

Offred's use of the words "picturesque" and "aesthetic" in the previously cited passages calls attention to the binary opposition between nature and culture, whereby "art" contains and transcends "nature" which is aligned with the feminine and maternal. Furthermore, these specific references to the decorative and commercial arts (wallpaper, salt and pepper shakers, greeting cards) expose the patriarchal agenda which confines women to domesticity and consumerism, granting her no identity outside the maternal function. The Handmaid's illusion of freedom on shopping days is a bitter parody of the present day cultural stereotype that marks women only as consumers in the sexual division of labor.<sup>28</sup> The mechanical reproduction of the Dutch milkmaids depicted here resonates with an earlier reference in Atwood's text to the "fake milk" Handmaids simultaneously produce by sympathetic lactation during the exhausting Birth Day rituals.<sup>29</sup> Gilead's patriarchy

allows women no productive role that enjoys the same preeminence as maternity.

Atwood's references to the tombstone carving and the greeting card angel are reified images, suggesting that either death or commodification at Jezebel's are women's only possible alternatives to Gilead's maternal injunction. In its Puritanical bleakness, the marmoreal carving on the grave marker forecasts the Salvaging scene where a Handmaid suspected of treason is hanged, her lifeless body reminding Offred of a "wingless angel" (286). As she later contemplates this execution, Offred foresees her own death as she lies "back in the snow like an angel made by children," and at the same time, she envisions the Handmaid who formerly inhabited her room as hanging from the chandelier, "a bird stopped in flight, a woman made into an angel" (293). In Gilead, to deny maternity is "to be made into an angel," to become frozen in death. Women's rejection of the maternal function imposed by Gilead means to deny one's corporality which masculine thought only recognizes as a means of reproducing itself (or in Irigaray's terms, "matter," "reproductive material," or "matrix").

In her essay, "Women on the Market," Irigaray further discusses the "speculative" value of women in the patriarchal economy: the mother as both natural value and use value, the virgin as pure exchange value, and the

prostitute as usage that has been exchanged. According to Irigaray, the mother represents nature which man cannot fully transcend, but he must "deny his relationship with productive nature" in order that his "relations among men may prevail" (185). Irigaray argues that the mother can never assume exchange value in society without challenging patriarchy's means of reproducing itself:

[M]others, reproductive instruments marked with the name of the father and enclosed in his house, must be private property, excluded from exchange. The incest taboo represents this refusal to allow productive nature to enter into exchanges among men. As both natural and use value, mothers cannot circulate in the form of commodities without threatening the very existence of the social order. (185)

The virgin, in contrast, is pure exchange value and represents the "possibility . . . [or] sign of relations among men." Only when she is "deflowered . . . is she relegated to the status of use value" and "removed from exchange among men" (186). Finally, the prostitute is "usage that has already been realized" and grows in worth "the more it has served" because its nature has been "used up," and as such is "no more than a vehicle of relations among men" (186).

Atwood conflates Irigaray's models of mother and prostitute in the construction of the Handmaid. By institutionalizing surrogate motherhood in the social role of the Handmaid, Gilead obtains both her natural and use values as commodities for exchange; whereas Commander's

Wives remain in one household, inscribed with the name of the father. When Handmaids are exchanged from one household to another, patriarchal hegemony becomes vulnerable by the very process it created to humiliate potentially rebellious women. Instead of remaining a locus of hidden power relations among men, the institution of the Handmaid becomes a site for revolution. Evidence of this occurs when Offred and Ofglen exchange information about the identities of their respective Commanders and gain knowledge of how to cooperate with the underground forces of Gilead. Superficially, the Handmaid seems to become just another function of the circulation of women among men, but The Handmaid's Tale suggests that the commodification of women through institutionalized maternity has the potential to subvert patriarchy.

However, Handmaids are not chosen solely for their physical ability to reproduce; from her lesbian friend Moira, now conscripted as a prostitute at Jezebel's, Offred is reminded that Handmaids were first chosen from the numbers of women who had already entered a second marriage and thus had been previously "exchanged" among men:

As long as you were some sort of Christian and you were married, for the first time that is, they were still leaving you pretty much alone. They were concentrating first on the others. They got them more or less under control before they started in on everybody else. (247)

Although Moira has never married, the reader assumes her lesbianism is sufficient reason to classify her as a

"whore," that is, a woman who does not conform to patriarchal notions of the "feminine." Handmaids occupy an ambiguous social position in Gilead because they represent both whore and madonna: therefore, Offred is treated with both respect and indignation, referring to herself as a "reproach" as well as a "necessity" in relation to Serena Joy (13).<sup>30</sup>

Since all "mothers" in this novel are now subject to "speculation" and exchange as goods among Commanders and other men in authority, references to commodities, especially cosmetic and domestic articles, continually define the power relations in this text.<sup>31</sup> In the concluding "Historical Notes," the reader learns that the Aunts who are responsible for training Handmaids are named after "commercial products available to women in the immediate pre-Gilead period, and thus familiar and reassuring to them -- the names of cosmetic lines, cake mixes, frozen desserts, and even medicinal remedies" (308). The assumption that women would find solace in such commodities is a comforting belief to the male "scholar" who speaks these words in the epilogue, and his failure to question such an assumption places him in the same speculative relationship to women as the Commanders of Gilead. Offred associates women who collaborate with male authority with commercial products since their collusion with patriarchy results in the commodification of all female

subjects. For example, she remembers that Serena Joy had another identity before the establishment of Gilead:

Serena Joy, what a stupid name. It's like something you'd put on your hair, in the other time, the time before, to straighten it. Serena Joy, it would say on the bottle, with a woman's head in cut-paper silhouette on a pink oval background with scalloped gold edges. (45)

Offred similarly describes the lugubrious Aunt Lydia who prays in a feigned abject posture for the Commanders' Wives:

"Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Again the tremulous smile, of a beggar, the weak-eyed blinking, the gaze upwards, through the round steel-rimmed glasses . . . as if the green-painted plaster ceiling were opening and God on a cloud of Pink Pearl face powder were coming down through the wires and sprinkler plumbing. (46)

The more ominous closing scene where Offred is taken away, whether by the Eyes or by the resistance, is cast in terms of the exchange of commodities: "I hear the bell toll, ding-dong, like the ghost of a cosmetics woman, down the hall' (293). The memory of cosmetic products also provokes a contrast between the female subject as a commodity and the privilege of the male reader. Since women are denied any right to literacy, books are viewed by Offred as representing the power of their owners; she considers the Bible, therefore, as a symbol of patriarchal authority. Its pages remind her of her status as commodity since she cannot read them but only imagine their texture as "soft and dry, like papier poudre, pink and powdery, from the time before, you'd get it in booklets for taking the shine off your nose" (90).

Offred's function as a use value also suggests her being as a commodity: her tattoo on her ankle designates her as a "national resource." The boredom and waiting that mark Offred's experience in many chapters signifies her potential exchange value as an "object not in use." However, she describes her body as an ever available "object for another" when the Commander summons her. Her awareness of her potential use and exchange value is reinforced in the training center when the Aunts make her repeat the Miltonic line disguised as a scriptural admonition: "They also serve who only stand and wait" (18).<sup>32</sup> And during the ritual copulation with the Commander and his Wife, Serena is "in control of both the process and product." But Serena's power is only a polite formality within the household; later in the evening, the Commander puts a luggage tag on Offred's wrist and tells her she'll pass the checkpoints disguised as an "evening rental." At the men's club, Offred glimpses the nexus of male power relations in a place where international trade delegations of men meet to share women. Offred learns that women can often find out trade secrets at the club, but as Moira reminds her, the real trafficking for power is in the exchange of women. Moira understands the Commanders' sexual attraction for the supposedly inviolable Handmaids assigned to them, a pleasure she specifically associates with the speculative economy: "Some of them do that, they get a kick out of it. It's like screwing on the altar or

something: your gang are supposed to be such chaste vessels. They like to see you all painted up. Just another crummy power trip" (my emphasis; 243).

The grim alternatives posed for women in The Handmaid's Tale demonstrate that Atwood's feminist concerns are strikingly similar to Irigaray's line of questioning: How can woman exist beyond the limits of sameness circumscribed by patriarchy? In fact, does she have access to a "feminine" identity that is unique to herself as woman? Caught up in the phallogentric scopic economy, women are only "hidden" complements, "Truth's other side," of the phallogentric logic that informs the symbolic order (210). Comparing the feminine economy to that which is hidden from symbolization, Irigaray argues that a culture privileging phallogentrism will maintain women's subordination as long as the masculine economy can successfully mystify the feminine economy as "Secret" (210). She invokes the dualism of inside/outside to illustrate how the masculine scopic economy effects this mystification of the feminine:

Inside and outside, we were not supposed to be the same. That doesn't suit their desires. Veiling and unveiling: isn't that what interests them? What keeps them busy? Always repeating the same operations, every time. On every woman.  
(210)

Irigaray's metaphor of veiling and unveiling acquires material and historical significance in light of contemporary critical reflection on colonialism. One such study is Malek Alloula's The Colonial Harem, which considers



the challenge facing the foreigner who attempts to photograph veiled Moorish women in early twentieth-century French-occupied Algeria.<sup>33</sup> Because the whiteness of the Moorish woman's veil becomes an absence or blank space in the finished photograph, "the photographer undergoes an initial experience of disappointment and rejection" since the full-length veil thwarts his scopic desire. Equally significant is the photographer's disturbing self-recognition of his own gaze as he faces the veiled Algerian subject through his lens: "Thrust in the presence of a veiled woman, the photographer feels photographed; having himself become an object-to-be-seen, he loses initiative: he is dispossessed of his own gaze" (14). But ultimately the colonial impulse, the drive to achieve domination and eventual conquest, will force the photographer to violate two taboos:

He will unveil the veiled and give figural representation to the forbidden. This is the summary of his program or, rather, his symbolic revenge upon a society that continues to deny him any access and questions the legitimacy of his desire. The photographer's studio will become, then, a pacified microcosm where his desire, his scopic instinct, can find satisfaction. (14)

In her introduction to Alloula's text, Barbara Harlow underscores this "analogy [which] links the imperialist project of colonizing other lands and peoples with the phantasm of appropriation of the veiled, exotic female" (xvi). Similarly, The Handmaid's Tale can be read according to this analogy as an imperialist text in that Atwood

constructs Gilead as a "pacified microcosm" of unrestrained scopophilic desire whereby Gilead's male leaders exact "symbolic revenge" on a culture which has denied them full access to the feminine economy. As a result, Gilead's patriarchy appropriates women's freedom and awards men with Wives and Handmaids as prizes, both completely veiled in their public dress.

The fact that the completely "veiled" Handmaid becomes a tourist attraction in Gilead foregrounds women's scopophilic victimization in the novel. When Offred and her partner discourage the activity of photographers among a group of Japanese tourists, the guide explains to the visitors "that to stare at them through the lens of a camera is, for them, an experience of violation" (29).<sup>34</sup> At this moment, Offred recalls Aunt Lydia's stern warning: "To be seen--to be seen--is to be--her voice trembled--penetrated. What you girls must be is impenetrable. She called us girls" (28). But the "foreign" tourists are not the only ones to impose their scopophilic desires on the Handmaids, for as women fully colonized by patriarchy, Handmaids are reserved for Commanders who alone have the privilege of uncovering and sexually violating them.

This artful construction of the Handmaid as exotic is illuminated by Offred's meditation on the purpose of the harem:

I remember walking in art galleries, through the nineteenth century: the obsession they had then

with harems. Dozens of paintings of harems, fat women lolling on divans, turbans on their heads or velvet caps, being fanned with peacock tails, a eunuch in the background standing guard. Studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who'd never been there. These pictures were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were, at the time; but I see now what they were really about. They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom.

But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men. (69)

Atwood not only conjures up the stereotypical, Western colonial fantasy of the East that male artists have traditionally represented by the female nude in the visual arts, but she also appropriates the "cult of orientalism" that surrounds the Eastern woman for the analysis of Western women's condition as subjects under patriarchy. Her novel, at the same time, works to demystify this exotic aura with which patriarchy has imbued the Handmaid, despite her puritanical trappings. Atwood accomplishes this by continually emphasizing the existential qualities of boredom and waiting that characterize the Handmaid's role, and especially through Offred's wry observation that "boredom is erotic" only when women are bored on behalf of men. By exposing her boredom, Offred begins a process of challenging and undermining the sexual imperialism that subjugates her and other Handmaids.

Harlow similarly addresses the challenge of subverting the colonial mindset when she asks Moroccan critic

Abdelkebir Khatibi to describe the Third World's task of deconstructing imperialist thought. Khatibi replies:

No, we have not yet reached that decolonization of thought which would be, over and above a reversal of that power, the affirmation of a difference, and free and absolute subversion of the spirit. There is there something like a void, a silent interval between the fact of colonization and that of decolonization. Not that, here and there, there aren't subversive and responsible words which break forth and are elaborated, but something choked and almost lost remains unspoken, does not assume the power and the risk. (xxii)<sup>35</sup>

Khatibi's comments have a remarkable affinity with both Atwood's text and Irigaray's theory.

Offred's subversive thoughts about boredom, occurring in the context of her present subjugation, suggest the potential for a profound challenge to her captors but remain within this "silent interval" Khatibi describes "between the fact of colonization and that of decolonization." This "silent interval" coincides with Offred's past description of her own silence in the face of mounting sexual violence prior to the Gileadean regime: "We were the people who were not in the [news]papers. We lived at the blank white spaces at the edges of the print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories" (57).

In Offred's past, her illusion of freedom from sexual violence prevents her from considering the possibility of her eventual erasure or displacement in society. However, her present descriptions of boredom as blank text in her narrative, "long parentheses of nothing," succeed in giving

voice to that which was previously silenced (69). She similarly describes her experience of waiting in oxymoronic terms, such as "white sound" and "blank time" which frustrate literal representation, just as the white veil frustrates the visual effect which Alloula's colonizer-photographer hoped to capture.

Khatibi's concept of the "decolonization of thought," like Irigaray's theory, does not seek merely to reverse power but to recognize difference. Similarly, Irigaray calls not for a reversal of power based on an already biased system of sexual indifference but for a "retraversal"<sup>36</sup> of metaphysical discourse that would challenge traditional notions of sexual differences based on dominance. For Irigaray, this would allow for a genuine alternative to the masculine symbolic order. If Atwood's colonized women cannot yet write as "fully liberated individuals-as-women-in-society," then Offred's discourse at least suggests the hope of social change as she begins to expose the gaps in the masculine logic which sustains the patriarchal economy of Gilead.

## III

## "Retraversing" the Specular Economy:

## Atwood's Use of Postmodern Parody

Irigaray's theory interrogates the logic of phallogocentrism from a feminist vantage point and questions the symbolic system that permits patriarchy, through the processes of representation, to reproduce images of itself in what Irigaray terms "a dominant scopic economy". In challenging "the domination of the philosophic logos," Irigaray emphasizes the need to account for the discursive systematicity and coherence which consolidate the speaking subject in a "position of mastery":

One way is to interrogate the conditions under which systematicity itself is possible: what the coherence of the discursive utterance conceals of the conditions under which it is produced, whatever it may say about these conditions in discourse. For example the "matter" from which the speaking subject draws nourishment in order to produce itself, to reproduce itself; the scenography that makes representation feasible, representation as defined in philosophy, that is, the architectonics of its theatre, its framing in space-time, its geometric organization, its props, its actors, their respective positions, their dialogues, indeed their tragic relations, without overlooking the mirror, most often hidden, that allows the logos, the subject, to reduplicate itself, to reflect itself by itself.  
(75)

Through the use of dramaturgical metaphors, Irigaray extends the denotative register of the term "architectonics" beyond its philosophical referent to include the realm of architecture. By referring to "scenography," spatial

framing, geometry, and props, Irigaray suggests that an actual stage setting might be the most useful analogy for demonstrating how the "theatre" of patriarchal society is literally "constructed," that is, as an artifice that can be analyzed and interpreted.

Examining Irigaray's theatrical tropes to discover how patriarchy is reproduced in The Handmaid's Tale, the reader can more easily discern the "architectonics" of patriarchal representation behind the power structure of Gilead, which allows Commanders as speaking subjects to "reduplicate" or repeat their "tragic relations" of dominance over women through the "hidden mirror," represented by the class of enforced childbearers, the Handmaids. Read according to Irigaray's analogy, Atwood's narrative demonstrates the relationships of power that create and sustain such patriarchal discourse.

The architectonics or ideological construction which supports the discursive systematicity behind the patriarchal power of Gilead becomes apparent in Atwood's presentation of the highly contrived setting of Gilead, a narrative feature which is not so much an issue of Atwood's style but rather a descriptive setting that illuminates the highly artificial construction of a patriarchal world that begs a deconstructive effort. The features of Gilead's setting reinforce patriarchy and, to borrow Irigaray's terminology, "ensure its coherence so long as they remain uninterpreted"

(75). To read the literal scenery and "props" that comprise the patriarchal landscape of Gilead involves exposing the means of subjugation and dominance that enables patriarchy to continue.

The awareness of Gilead's scenic artifice or "scenography" begins with Offred's first shopping trip with her companion. The activity of shopping has become ritualized for Handmaids, a punitive regimen that creates a silent and humiliating spectacle as pairs of Handmaids parade solemnly in public to perform their perfunctory service as consumers. This enforced stereotyping of women and its routinization as a daily activity underscore the artificial containment of women by Gilead's patriarchy. As she walks toward the shopping district with her companion, Offred detects an artificial quality about her surroundings and compares the neighboring houses to a stage-set. Passing before "large, empty-looking houses" with "weedless lawns" (44), Offred notices that her route is a prop-like setting with the surface quality of a theatrical backdrop, in front of which the Handmaids as actors travel back and forth:

The lawns are tidy, the facades are gracious, in good repair; they're like the beautiful pictures they used to print in the magazines about homes and gardens and interior decoration. There is the same absence of people, the same air of being asleep. The street is almost like a museum, or a street in a model town constructed to show the way people used to live. As in those pictures, those museums, those model towns, there are no children. (my emphasis; 23)



Seeing the shopping route lined with upper class residences as a "model town" constructed in a museum, Offred discerns the ideological effort on the part of Gilead's ruling class to appeal to a sense of self-preservation, as the material comforts associated with domestic beauty anesthetize the passing Handmaids.

In later passages, these same streets are also referred to as "decorous, matronly, and somnambulent" (my emphasis; 267). Exposing patriarchy's desire to lull the "somnambulent" with attractive residential scenery that evokes an atmosphere of tranquil domesticity, Atwood invests this highly constructed setting with suggestively gendered references to the cultivation of domestic beauty advertised in home improvement magazines. This scene is no accidental backdrop for the Handmaids whose ideological programming to repopulate Gilead coincides with the ethos of domestic beauty which patriarchy often aligns with the maternal function. Exposing the patriarchal strategy that romanticizes domesticity, Atwood's description of Gilead's "scenography" must be read as part of the paternal plot to coerce Handmaids (as well as Wives) to literally duplicate the regime's male power structures through the reproductive-maternal functions.

Offred's contradictory reaction to this "scenery" as both beautiful and bizarre demonstrates what Allison Jagger sees as the peculiar functioning of ideology:

a successful ideology is never straightforwardly false; it does not describe the world as totally other than it is. Instead, a successful ideology is a seductive blend of truth and misrepresentation that distorts and obscures the facts rather than denying them completely. (256)

In attempting to explain how patriarchal ideology shapes social attitudes about childbirth and mothering, Jagger also illustrates the workings of patriarchal society through its emphasis of the "special qualities women develop as mothers" and on how it contradictorily works to "obscure the fact that these qualities are developed in a situation of domination" (256). Reading Atwood's description of scenery as exposing the "construction" of the patriarchal ideology that it attempts to hide becomes a lesson about how dominant groups obscure and distort social reality in order to maintain their power.

Despite the fact that Offred secretly repudiates her ideological manipulation in The Handmaid's Tale, she must nevertheless play her role convincingly in order to avoid suspicion. Like Irigaray's "philosopher's wife" of Speculum of the Other Woman, she must "wed the philosopher" in order to "get back inside [his] ever coherent systems" (This Sex 150). Offred must act as a "duplicating mirror" and "reproductive material" to a male authority that would seek its own reflection in her masquerade of feminine submission:

If she can play that role so well, if it does not kill her, quite, it is because she keeps something in reserve with respect to this function. Because she still subsists, otherwise and elsewhere than there where she mimes so well

what is asked of her. Because her own "self" remains foreign to the whole staging. But she doubtless needs to reenact it in order to remember what that staging has probably metabolized so thoroughly that she has forgotten it: her own sex. Her sex is heterogenous to this whole economy of representation, but it is capable of interpreting that economy precisely because it has remained "outside." Because it does not postulate oneness, or sameness, or reproduction, or even representation. Because it remains somewhere else than in that general repetition where it is taken up only as the otherness of sameness. (152)

According to Carole-Anne Tyler, Irigaray's references to role-playing and miming establish "a gap between woman and her image, the distance necessary for knowledge" (195). As a result of her miming her feminine role, women "shatter the mirror man offers woman, interrupting the masquerade of closeness to the image he desires and producing knowledge effects" (197).<sup>37</sup>

For Tyler, Irigaray's subversive mimicry is both deconstructive and reconstructive, "producing a space of feminine reciprocity," or feminine "in-difference," wherein "subject-object relations are not predicated on aggressive disidentification from images of lack" (198). Irigaray shifts the question of woman's identity away from logocentric interrogation (i.e. "What is woman?") to a practice of repeating and interpreting how, "within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as an imitation and negative image of the subject" (78). As a result of this mimetic practice, women "should signify that with respect to this logic a disruptive

excess is possible on the feminine side" (78). According to Irigaray, when a woman speaks from "the feminine side," she effectively "puts the torch to fetish words, proper terms, well-constructed forms" (79).

If the purpose of Irigaray's subversive mimicry is to shatter the self-reflective mirror of sexual indifference whereby man constructs the feminine as lack, woman must first "cross back through the mirror that subtends all speculation" (77). This significance of the mirror metaphor for Irigaray helps explain the momentous intervention of mirrors in The Handmaid's Tale. Throughout her novel, Atwood associates the containment of the feminine and her erotic function with reflecting and refracting surfaces. For example, in the opening chapter of the novel where Handmaids are detained in a gymnasium, Offred recalls a similar gymnasium where she once attended school dances. She reconstructs the memory of "a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light." What is "illuminated" by the reflecting sphere are the many dress styles Offred recalls which evolved during the latter half of the twentieth century: felt-skirts (1950's), miniskirts and pants (1960's), "one earring," and "spiky, green-streaked hair" (1970's-80's). Since "one earring" and "spiky, green-streaked hair" have been fashion statements for females and males alike, Offred's description of women's dress on the dance floor indicates significant changes in

style from the recognizably "feminine" to unisex clothing. Offred's mention of clothing styles points to the breakdown of external and therefore superficial determinants of sexual difference while it ominously points to the present backlash by a patriarchal society that would feel threatened by the disappearance of gendered clothing; as a result, Gilead's leaders decide to clothe women the way they see fit. Offred's daydream about evolving dress styles toward a unisex look becomes ironic in the present context of the novel where women's bodies have been colonized by the patriarchy and appropriately coded according to the different garments that specify their gender roles.

In another early scene from the novel, refracted sunlight through a windowpane in the Commander's house emblazons the braided handmade rug in Offred's bedroom which she associates with the ideological constraint of women by what society labels "traditional values." In both scenes, the revolving sphere of mirrors and the sunlit windowpane are optical effects which illuminate the visible yet arbitrary determinants of sexual difference and their "proper" gender roles in a masculine economy.

To represent patriarchy's containment of feminine sexuality, Atwood refers to other optical devices in the narrative such as the convex mirror, magnifying and photographic lenses, and distorting reflective surfaces.<sup>38</sup> This strategy is similar to the critical method of Irigaray,

whose interrogation of the patriarchal system as a visual or specular economy also employs "specular" critical tools.<sup>39</sup> For example, Irigaray describes her mimetic project in Speculum of the Other Woman as "having a fling with the philosophers," whereby she mirrors their discourse in order "to get back inside their ever so coherent systems" (This Sex 150). But she believes that woman must not simply reflect back what the dominant discourse proposes by assuming the role of what she calls the "flat mirror" that already "privileges the relation of man to his fellow man" (154). Instead, Irigaray chooses the metaphor of the concave mirror to articulate this mode of "feminine speculation":

Thus it was necessary both to reexamine the domination of the specular and the speculative over history and also--since the specular is one of the irreducible dimensions of the speaking animal--to put into place a mode of specularization that allows for the relation of woman to "herself" and to her like. Which presupposes a curved mirror, but also one that is folded back on itself, with its impossible reappropriation 'on the inside' of the mind, of thought, of subjectivity. Whence the intervention of the speculum and of the concave mirror, which disturb the staging of representation according to too-exclusively masculine parameters. (155; her emphasis)

In This Sex Which Is Not One, Irigaray posits a feminine specificity in relation to language which "implies a logic other than the one imposed by discursive coherence" (153). This feminine logic enables woman to reexamine or "retraverse" the philosophical tradition and its discourses,

or in Irigaray's words, "go back through the processes of specula(riza)tion that subtend our social and cultural organization" (154). Therefore, Irigaray attempts to create a "feminine locus" from which to challenge all symbolic structures that sustain the patriarchal order. Through her construction of Offred, Atwood also theorizes the existence of a feminine signifying economy, a language both erotic and subversive. Offred's narrative becomes a subversive act of reading and revising the texts of the reproductive-maternal ideology, and her discourse is potentially liberatory in that she deconstructs patriarchal notions of sexual difference (women's reflection of man's wholeness through her "lack") and reconstructs a feminine economy through mimicry of the patriarchal symbolic order.

Offred's self-conscious narration deliberately confronts the tensions between women's erotic and maternal functions, and Atwood emphasizes these tensions by focusing her narrator's gaze on distorting reflective surfaces. In this respect, The Handmaid's Tale represents a development in Atwood's use of mirrors in her previous fiction. For example, Pamela S. Bromberg has discussed the significance of the mirror in The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle, arguing that both novels use the mirror to reveal contradictions in Western culture's construction of the feminine:

In the English literary tradition, women are often criticized and punished for the sin of narcissism, for loving their own images and selves above all (especially masculine) others.

Yet it is precisely women's images, that is, their beauty, that society most prizes and rewards in the marriage market. . . . But that beauty must be validated in the eyes of the masculine beholder. The power of beauty is then necessarily derivative and secondary. The woman who looks in the mirror and finds herself beautiful . . . is dangerous, because she has appropriated the masculine scopic power of approval. She must then be corrected or punished.<sup>40</sup>

Bromberg demonstrates how the use of mirrors in both novels exposes a society that produces women as objects, "packaged for the marriage market" (13). If the image women see when they gaze into the mirror is "the internalization of the male gaze," what women seek in their reflection is the beauty that will insure their "primary market value in the marriage exchange" (14).<sup>41</sup>

Like The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle, The Handmaid's Tale provides mirror episodes to expose sexual power relations which entrap women in the masculine specular economy. In this novel, however, the patriarchal rulers in Gilead restrict women's access to their own images by replacing household mirrors with dull, gray sheets of metal, ostensibly to prevent the Handmaids from committing suicide with glass shards. Offred muses about the absence of mirrors in the Commander's home, her thoughts turn to escaping her oppression either through suicide or madness:

I know why there is no glass, in front of the watercolor picture of blue irises, and why the window opens only partly, and why the glass in it is shatterproof. It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those



other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge. (8)

However, Atwood's narrative rules out the possibility that the threat of suicide was the overriding concern of Gilead's rulers who deny women access to mirrors. Offred's Commander implies that it is no longer necessary for women to need mirrors since all cosmetic and beauty products have been eliminated in order to eradicate the social pressures women previously endured while competing to attract men. He explains this at length while lauding the institutionalization of pre-arranged marriages:

We've given them more than we've taken away. . . Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the one's who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. . . . This way they all get a man, nobody's left out. (219)

Here, the Commander falsely reconstructs women's past freedom as merely a form of social imprisonment whereby women viciously compete to win men. Through this explanation, the Commander participates in constructing patriarchal ideology by blending truth with fiction. While some women go to painful extremes to recreate a face and body that will reflect masculine notions of the feminine (hoping to win male attention), many women would feel victimized by confronting such a choice. The Commander's logic also seeks to account for women's past "imprisonment"

within the social institutions of marriage and the family:

And if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, they'd have to go on welfare. Or else he'd stay around and beat them up. Or if they had a job, the children in daycare or left with some brutal ignorant woman, and they'd have to pay for that themselves, out of their wretched little paychecks. Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up the whole business. This way they're protected. (219)

This passage abounds with examples of culturally accepted notions of marriage, motherhood, and childrearing that Jane Silverman Van Buren has labeled "mythology," the ideology that organizes the experience of motherhood "around the segregation of sexual spheres" (161). This division is demonstrated at the end of the Commander's speech when he states that this plan allows women to "fulfill their biological destinies in peace" (220). The Commander, under the guise of protecting women, removes them from the economic sphere that would give them the possibility of gaining material wealth and liberating themselves from dependence on males. His essentialist logic, that woman's body destines her only for maternity, transfers to women themselves the responsibility for all social ills that have disproportionately affected them. His harangue is as much an admission that society refuses to see these social issues--wage inequities, inadequate daycare programs, child abuse, wife beatings--as having their roots in sex discrimination. There is no admonishment for the husband

who deserts or beats his family; rather, the solution lies in greater restrictions on women and the control of their reproductive functions. The "terrible gap" he mentions "between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't" displaces attention from the actual gap created by patriarchal notions of sexual difference that encourage women to masquerade as feminine for male gratification. The Commander's speech reveals how Gilead's authorities have succeeded in removing the temptation of female narcissism that might appropriate "the masculine scopical power of approval by creating the Handmaid who faithfully mirrors their patriarchal powers.

With the absence of mirrors and other reflective surfaces, Offred's confrontation with her own image is usually an accidental encounter that is often accompanied by surprise or discovery, rather than becoming a narcissistic moment. These "reflective" incidents become central to Offred's process of rethinking the specular economy that objectifies her and other women. For example, she daily passes a convex pier glass that has been left as ornamentation in the hallway. Even though these moments of self-recognition are usually nothing more than fleeting glimpses of herself, they nevertheless become occasions for interrogating the power structure of Gileadean society. In one of the opening scenes of the novel, Offred descends the

stairway of the Commander's home and glimpses herself in a convex mirror:

There remains a mirror, on the hall wall. If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pier glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood. (9)

The pier glass is an important focal point in this novel because it distorts images while literally foregrounding the specular economy that constrains women. The "fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger" is an obvious miming of the masculine economy which informs the fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood."<sup>42</sup> But Offred's description, instead of merely repeating the scene of feminine containment and threat of death from the original tale, more closely approaches Hélène Cixous's classic reading of Little Red Riding Hood. For Cixous, Red Riding Hood is a metaphor for woman's pleasure, "a little clitoris" (43). The "always wicked" Grandmother is just another version of the phallic mother who "shuts the daughter in whenever the daughter might by chance want to live or take pleasure" (43-44). As she descends the stairs, Offred momentarily sees the truth of her existence as "shut in" or enclosed by the pier glass, a sign of her confinement in the patriarchal

system that is enforced by the "bad mothers" in the roles of Wives and Aunts.

Just as Atwood makes the pier glass a conspicuous metaphor for patriarchal confinement in this novel, she also emphasizes this same containing power of the convex mirror in a subsequent novel, Cat's Eye, in which the female protagonist Elaine Risley, a visual artist, gives a detailed account of her fascination with painting distorted reflections:

I become fascinated with the effects of glass, and of other light-reflecting surfaces. I study paintings in which there are pearls, crystals, mirrors, shiny details of brass. I spend a long time over Van Eyck's The Arnolfini Marriage, going over the inadequate color print of it in my textbook with a magnifying glass; what fascinates me is not the two delicate, pallid, shoulderless hand-holding figures, but the pier glass on the wall behind them, which reflects in its convex surface not only their backs but two other people who aren't in the main picture at all. These figures reflected in the mirror are slightly askew, as if a different law of gravity, a different arrangement of space, exists inside, locked in, sealed up in the glass as if in a paperweight. This round mirror is like an eye, a single eye that sees more than anyone else looking: over this mirror is written, Johannes de Eyck fuit hic. 1434. It's disconcertingly like a washroom scribble, something you'd write with spray paint on a wall. (343)

Later in this novel, Elaine Risley actually paints a self-portrait that is a parody of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride. The painting, which she entitles Cat's Eye, features only a portion of her face that is decentered yet staring at the viewer. Behind the artist's face is a convex mirror, but the reflection of the back of the artist's head in the

pier glass is a younger version of the foregrounded and decentered face that gazes outward. Three small figures of girls can be seen in the glass, dressed in clothing that dates back forty years. Here, Atwood plays with the laws of space and time which she associates with the pier glass. The painting's title reminds Elaine Risley of a particular marble she treasured from childhood: "My blue cat's eye: I look into it and see my entire life" (418). For the child Elaine, the marble possesses power (165). In this novel, Atwood describes time as a dimension that cannot be separated from space; in fact, "space-time is curved" (232). Atwood's use of the convex mirror suggests a way of seeing unique to the feminine viewpoint, and this function of the mirror coincides with what Jenijoy La Belle refers to as "the glass of time" whereby the "tenses of the mirror" multiply the "possibility of difference."<sup>43</sup> La Belle argues that women characters in literature see a "variety of self-conceptions" when they gaze into the mirror over time, and Atwood's parodic assimilation of Van Eyck's painting in Cat's Eye accomplishes this for Elaine Risley as she comes to terms with her past.

Similarly in The Handmaid's Tale, Offred must try to understand her present circumstances in terms of her past life. In order to effect this, Atwood creates a feminine mode of speculation through the prominence of the convex pier glass. Specifically, Offred's preoccupation with her

different images in the pier glass can be read as a subtle parodic gesture toward John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," and there is no text more conducive to Atwood's examination of the masculine economy of representation than this eminently specular poem. In the narcissistic "Self-Portrait," the male poet reflects upon the male artist Parmigianino, who reflecting upon his own image in a convex mirror, paints a representation of exactly what he sees. In an attempt to reproduce his distorted image in tondo form on a convex surface, Parmigianino substitutes his painting for the mirror itself.<sup>44</sup> As art critic Stanley Freedberg has observed, "We are meant to accept the illusion, if only for the briefest initial moment of seeing an actual reflected image in an actual mirror."<sup>45</sup> Ashbery, observing the illusion of depth in this portrait, contemplates the limits of self-reflection and the illusion of lucidity it encourages.<sup>46</sup>

Anita Sokolsky construes the poet's relationship to Parmigianino's painting as "a self-reflexive attempt to speculate [one's] way out of narcissism" and thus "end reflexivity" (235). Sokolsky argues that speculative and narcissistic activities are identical:

The hackneyed scruple which compels Ashbery to remind us that the word "speculation" is "From the Latin speculum, mirror," makes that link clear. The speculative enterprise and the narcissistic are one and the same: the attempt to think one's way out of oneself is forever circumscribed by the realization that one has

remained all along within a speculative circle which one keeps rethinking. (234-35)

Atwood parodies Ashbery's paternalistic gesture which begins by evoking Parmigianino's narcissism, Vasari's elucidation of Parmigianino's portrait, Freedberg's circumscription of Parmigianino and Vasari, and Ashbery's own self-reflection which these speculations provoke. Ashbery's poem produces an illusion of concentric circles of commentary or lucidity, and Atwood's parody, in foregrounding the specular enterprise and its self-absorbing narcissism, recognizes convexity as a metaphor for masculine discourse in its tendency to circumscribe the subject in a speculative circle.

One critic has suggested that the repeated references to circles and curves in The Handmaid's Tale are "female images," suggesting an association between the convexity of the pier glass and "the swollen belly of a pregnant woman (211). However, this reading fails to detect the humorous resonance between Atwood's description of the Handmaid Janine and the opening line of Ashbery's poem:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand  
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer  
And swerving easily away, as though to protect  
What it advertises. (Self-Portrait 1-4)

Ashbery's "advertisement" ironically signifies both invitation and enclosure, a reference Atwood echoes with important political implications for women consigned to the maternal functions in The Handmaid's Tale. When "vastly



pregnant" Janine enters the marketplace advertising "her belly [which] swells triumphantly," Offred notices that "her hands rest on it as if to defend it" (my emphasis; 26). Janine's "defensive" posture parodies Parmigianino's self-reflection, seen by Ashbery as self-protecting; Ashbery's opening line admits the simultaneous lure of the specular, the portrait's trompe l'oeil effect that momentarily tempts the viewers to see their own reflection as opposed to the portrait's self-imposed boundary that segregates the experience of artist and viewer.

Atwood constructs Janine's entry as an advertisement with this same ambivalence: Janine is at once "an object of envy and desire. . . showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved" (26). Yet the reactions of other Handmaids testify to this ambivalence: "'Showoff,' a voice hisses, and this is true. A woman that pregnant doesn't have to go out, doesn't have to go shopping. . . . She's come here to display herself" (26). The convex mirror represents the privileging of phallomorphism, and Janine's tondo form invites other Handmaids to see their reflection in her. Her pregnant shape exerts a trompe l'oeil effect in that the Handmaids only desire to see themselves similarly pregnant when in fact, their envy of Janine's shape overshadows the fact of their coercion to reproduce. Offred expresses this same dreadful desire to become pregnant during the copulation ceremony as she gazes upward at the

convex canopy over the bed, a tent-like enclosure she refers to as "the big-bellied sails of Serena Joy's bed."

Here, parody is not without political force for Atwood. Just as in Ashbery's poem the poet attempts to think his way out of the speculative circle, Atwood's Handmaid must think her way out of the speculative economy that represents the constraints of patriarchal language and culture. The convex morphology of the pier glass is a disturbing reminder of the maternity each Handmaid must achieve to save her life, and the convex mirror in this novel becomes a consistent masculine metaphor for the containment of women within the maternal function by patriarchy. Read as a parody of Ashbery's Self-Portrait, The Handmaid's Tale conforms to Linda Hutcheon's notion of postmodern parody whereby one author installs then subverts the text of another author for ironic effect.<sup>47</sup> Atwood's parody is political to the extent that she selects a text which foregrounds the very scopic functions she wishes to expose as a self-reflecting enterprise. Atwood's use of postmodern parody is also strikingly similar to Irigaray's subversive mimicry which upsets the dominant scopic economy by exposing the blind side of masculine specular logic.

For Ashbery, the realization that "the soul is captive" in the convex sphere leads to the death of this illusion: "The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts, /Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul" (ll. 44-45). The

soul, Ashbery reflects, "has to stay where it is, / Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,/ The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,/ Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay/ Posing in this place. It must move / As little as possible" (ll. 34-39). These lines are almost identical to Atwood's description of Offred's monotonous nights as she waits in hope of becoming pregnant: "The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don't move. As long as I lie still" (37). At night, she is like the soul Ashbery detects, entrapped but "longing to be free" of the confines of the maternal function:

I used to think of my body as an instrument,  
of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an  
implement for the accomplishment of my will. I  
could use it to run, push buttons of one sort or  
another, make things happen. There were limits,  
but my body was nevertheless lithe, single,  
solid, one with me.

Now the soul arranges itself differently.  
(73)

Offred describes her former self as a subject who could act, within limits, but according to her desires. Here, Atwood continues the parodic juxtaposition of the maternal body and Ashbery's reflection on Parmigianino's painting. Ashbery, viewing the life-like representation of the painter, declares that the image must be real: "the soul establishes itself" (l. 24). Atwood's prose resonates with a difference: "Now the flesh arranges itself differently" (73). Atwood's careful choice of the word "flesh" --in

contrast to Ashbery's term "soul"-- equates Offred with corporal matter. According to Irigaray, woman can say nothing of her own pleasure (96) since "the feminine" exists only as "reservoir of matter and of speculation" (155); thus, in the masculine symbolic economy, woman serves only to "underwrite" male narcissism that "often extends onto a transcendental dimension" (151). This is why Irigaray can claim that "women don't have a soul: they serve as guarantee for man's" (97).

Ashbery's mournful admission of the illusory soul in the convex portrait only intensifies his narcissistic reflection: "The words are only speculation/ (From the Latin speculum, mirror)" (ll. 48-49). This leads him to reflect on the illusion of depth in the portrait which makes him proclaim, "but it is life englobed" (55). The convex morphology of "englobed" life is repeated by Atwood when Offred refers to Janine's swollen body as "the carrier of life" (26). Offred's further references to women as "containers," "sacred vessels," "two-legged wombs," and "ambulatory chalices" coincide with Ashbery's globular container, itself a metaphor for the privileging of phallomorphism and of masculine self-reflection, which Sokolsky terms "a closed narcissistic economy," or "a little world which encapsulates one's own meaning" (244). Through postmodern parody, Atwood exploits Ashbery's grappling with the constraints of narcissism, and creates by analogy the

pear/womb, an enclosed world where woman is dictated to by the self-referential patriarchal system that demands her reproductive labor:

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside, it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black. Pinpoints of light swell, sparkle, burst, shrivel within it, countless as stars. Every month, there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time. (73-74)

In this passage, a woman's value is determined by the regularity of her menstrual cycles which insure her potential reproductive function. Atwood's represents a woman's universe as no larger than the circumference of her womb, and this organ offers no hope of feminine desire or pleasure outside the maternal function.

Atwood's representation of a female universe is constructed from the competing dichotomies of metaphysical discourse that contain women and reduce them to subservience. In the description of the pear/womb universe, the symbols of darkness and the lunar cycles evoke a sense of emptiness, futility, and passivity in Offred. Hélène Cixous explores this entrapping sequence of "metaphors that organize culture" in her essay "Castration or Decapitation":

So between two houses, between two beds, she [woman] is laid, ever caught in her chain of

metaphors. . . ever her moon to the masculine sun,  
 nature to culture, concavity to masculine  
 convexity, matter to form, immobility/inertia to  
 the march of progress, terrain trod by the  
 masculine footstep, vessel. . . . While man is  
 obviously the active, the upright, the  
 productive. . . and besides, that's how it  
 happens in History. (44)

Cixous refers to the inequality of binary oppositions as "the couple," and she defines the couple as "a space of cultural struggle" where the feminist scholar must work for social and cultural transformation. Irigaray's critical practice of specula(riza)tion works according to this mandate as she "crosses back through the mirror that subtends all speculation" (77), and through mimicry, she attempts to "go back inside the philosopher's house" (151). Since woman must rediscover the place of her self-affection in an economy based more on touching than on seeing, Irigaray's "retraversal" of masculine discourse must entail a repositioning of woman within a discourse of self-affection. The kind of speculation involved in the strategy of retraversal upsets the masculine staging of representation which is indifferent or hostile toward a uniquely feminine sexuality.

An example of this kind of retraversal occurs when Offred descends the stairs at midnight, escorted by Serena Joy, who has arranged for Offred to have sex with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur. As Offred sees their reflections in the hall mirror, she observes: "I see the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape, in the brief glass eye of the mirror as

we descend. Myself, my obverse" (259). The multiple signification here suggests the kind of discourse Irigaray's retraversal seeks to establish. Literally, Offred sees herself and her "obverse," or counterpart, Serena Joy. But because Serena Joy shares complicity with patriarchal power structures in oppressing women, she is necessarily an oppositional counterpart as she appears in the mirror: "obverse" thus suggests the logical term of counter-proposition. Atwood's use of the logical reference is decidedly ironic since Offred has just returned from an evening with the Commander as a result of his "propositioning" her, only to become doubly victimized by Serena's counter "propositioning" of her with Nick.

However, the staging of this dualistic bind of proposition/counter-proposition is upset as Offred recognizes that this obverse image is also her own reflection literally turned back on itself, enabling Offred to affirm her difference. Through this act of obversion, Offred participates in a self-affective economy that allows her to mimic her prescribed feminine role while recognizing that she is not totally appropriated by patriarchy's constraining logic.<sup>48</sup> The convex mirror becomes at once a symbol of Offred's oppression as well as of her escape from the tyranny of the maternal function. For Atwood, the convex mirror offers a point of entry into a feminine economy, for crossing back through its convexity

(interrogating its phallic economy) positions Offred on its obverse side, its concave or feminine space. Atwood's parodic if not subversive appropriation of Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" reminds us that the specular activity to escape reflexivity has an added dimension in the context of gender. If Ashbery must finally admit to confinement within the speculative circle, Atwood's novel testifies that women are doubly confined by the specular economy she recognizes as specifically a masculine enterprise.

Atwood's use of subversive mimicry also includes her play on the word "speculation" in order to imagine a discourse beyond the confines of the dominant symbolic order. Offred's frequent repetition of the word "speculation" continues to parody Ashbery's Self-Portrait, but it extends beyond this function for Atwood: Offred refers to speculation as both the confines of symbolic discourse and as woman's ability to think of the feminine outside that confinement. In the following passage, Offred's "speculation" becomes a means of articulating women's entrapment, both sexual and symbolic, in the masculine symbolic order:

The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don't move. As long as I lie still. The difference between lie and lay. Lay is always passive. Even men used to say, I'd like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I'd like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don't really know



what men used to say. I had only their words for it. (37)

In this passage, Offred painfully admits her passive consignment as a sexual object "to be laid" by men. Her self-imposed restrictions to make no noise or movement define the limits placed on her "own time." Her speculation on the differences between verb tenses reveals her limited social [and sexual] positions in patriarchal culture, but these same thoughts also offer escape from the constraints of this culture.

Like La Belle's tenses of the mirror, Offred's speculations offer an awareness that even while confined in the present where she is running "out of time" to conceive, she can escape the cultural imaginary of patriarchy by being both in and "out of time":

I lie, then, inside the room, under the plaster eye in the ceiling. . . between the sheets. . . and step sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it.

But the night is my time out. Where should I go?

Somewhere good. (37)

This meditation, like others from the chapters entitled "Night," represents a space where Offred is free of the scopoc economy and can dream "under the plaster eye" on her ceiling which she diagnoses as blind. Freed only momentarily from the specular powers that restrict her, she can author her own version of her past and present conditions.

In another scene involving subversive appropriation of masculine speculation, Offred and Ofglen stare at their reflections in a storefront window that frames the "Soul Scrolls" prayer machines. When Ofglen asks aloud whether or not God listens to the machines, Offred realizes that such benign inquiry, which may be a pretense to entrap her, is now a life-threatening venture: "In the past, this would have been a trivial enough remark, a kind of scholarly speculation. Right now it's treason" (168). Deciding to risk an answer, Offred "steels" herself to reply "No," becoming momentarily aware of the freedom she feels in challenging the dominant discourse whose speculative enterprise excludes her representation: "She lets out her breath, in a long sigh of relief. We have crossed the invisible line together" (168).

Speculation is also the guesswork or piecing together of fragments which reveals the broken narrative line of Offred's story. She apologizes to the reader for "so much speculation about others" instead of being able to offer a "different story," one with "more shape" and with "sudden realizations important to one's life" (267). The linearity and definitiveness she longs for is supplanted by the realization that, despite this "sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story," it is through the process of recounting her story "over, over again," akin to Irigaray's subversive repetition with a difference, that she

engenders hope for a different future: "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (268). Linda Hutcheon has pointed to Atwood's parody of Descartes' cogito ergo sum in this passage, but Hutcheon does not explain that Offred's parodic version rejects the masculine Cartesian subject who constructs "his" own identity through the self-reflection of specular logic; instead, through her admission that her story is speculation, Offred constructs her own subjectivity with a feminine difference based on a narrative process which demands reciprocity or mutual exchange. She therefore depends on the existence of a community of speakers and listeners, readers and writers, or a context of relationships not structured on dominance, whereby genuine feminine identity can be actualized.

Equally subversive is Offred's attempt to establish an audience or community of discourse as she narrates her story. Since the activities of reading, writing, and speaking are forbidden to women of Gilead, Offred defiantly insists on establishing her identity as though composing a text: "I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (66). Her insistence that her identity involves a process of self-composition is

a rebuttal to the patriarchy of Gilead which exploits women by defining them only according to their "natural" function of mothers. Her repudiation of the idea of biological destiny ("not something born" but "a made thing") signals her intention to construct an alternative identity to the one imposed on her by male authority.

Offred's narrative speculation is similarly transgressive when Aunt Lydia announces that crimes of Handmaids will no longer be made public. Offred's disappointment over this restriction stems from the loss of subversive energy and hope which these crimes fostered: "The crimes of others are a secret language among us. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all. . . . Now we are left to our own speculations" (275). This passage again associates speculation with guesswork, but this piecing together of women's whispered transgressions to create feminine solidarity is an act of composition similar to that in which Offred participates in constructing her identity. This guesswork is now the only available means for political subversion, and this explains in part why Offred's narrative often calls attention to itself as a reconstruction:

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said. (114)

Partly a retelling of her past since she is now removed from the scene of oppression, and partly a recuperation of her

partial self from patriarchal dominance, Offred's narrative is an attempt to reconstructing an authentic feminine identity.

Similarly, Offred relates her fantasy of seducing the Commander and subsequently killing him, but she states: "In fact, I don't think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. As I said, this is a reconstruction" (140). When she later rewrites the same fantasy which ends differently with her kissing the Commander, she also disqualifies this account as a reconstruction. Read as a political text, Offred's several versions of one account thwarts any tendency to create a unified and coherent narrative within a discursive order that denies her feminine identity.

Like Irigaray's "retraversal of discourse," Offred's narrative of plural accounts creates a "disruptive excess" that the symbolic order cannot contain or comprehend. Furthermore, she protects the identity she is constructing by omitting crucial details which obstruct the speculative task of the scholars in the epilogue. She omits factual evidence of her name, her friends and family's names, as well as the actual names of the Commander and his wife. She preserves her new self-construction while never mentioning dates or exact references to location that could position her through a historical reconstruction of her narrative.

It isn't a story I'm telling.  
It's also a story I'm telling, in my head,  
as I go along.

Tell, rather than write, because I have  
nothing to write with and writing is in any case  
forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head,  
I must be telling it to someone. . . Dear You,  
I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a  
name attaches you to the world of fact, which is  
riskier, more hazardous. (39-40)

This passage is a scene of resistance in Offred's narrative because she defies the prohibition against speaking. Since Handmaids represent the most thorough containment of women by Gilead's patriarchy, any articulation of their position outside the masculine parameters that define them is subversive, and Offred's political subversion begins with the act of "composing" herself outside the patriarchal representation that restricts women to a reproductive-maternal function.

#### IV

#### The Mother as Vanishing Point in the Perspective of Patriarchal History

The pleasure Offred experiences in composing and writing allows her further insight into the condition of her oppression and of her possible liberation. In her attempt to rearticulate feminine difference within patriarchal culture, Offred is self-conscious of her limitation as a

speaking subject from a position of constraint within symbolic discourse. Her response involves the construction of a uniquely feminine perspective, one that reconstructs her identity while contradicting the dominant specular economy which defines her as incomplete.<sup>49</sup> Offred continually repeats the need to understand the conditions of her oppression more clearly throughout her narrative, and she usually expresses this need in terms of "perspective":

What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface. Perspective is necessary. Otherwise, there are only two dimensions. Otherwise, you live with your face squashed up against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details, close-ups, hairs, the weave of the bedsheet, the molecules of the face. Your own skin like a map, a diagram of futility, crisscrossed with tiny roads that lead nowhere. Otherwise, you live the moment. Which is not where I want to be. (143)

These references once again summon Ashbery's Self Portrait. Ashbery's futile attempt to escape the self-reflexive economy finds him "always cresting into one's present" (ll. 386). Offred's desire to escape the present parodies Ashbery's futile escape, and like Ashbery, Offred admits that "time is a trap and I'm caught in it" (143).

However, Atwood breaks through the confining circularity represented by her allusions to Ashbery's Self-Portrait by providing an alternative to the self-reflexive trap that instigates his tone of despair. When Offred analyzes the appeal of women's magazines which the Commander

tempts her to read, she gains perspective on the ideology of sexual difference that informs her culture:

What was in them was promise. They dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors set facing one another, stretching on, replica after replica, to the vanishing point. . . . The real promise in them was immortality. (157)

Here, Offred's acknowledgement of the illusory perspective of endless distance becomes a way of seeing through ideological constructions that produce an image of women which gratifies the male spectator. In the present society of Gilead, Offred laments that young girls will never have a perspective on the past because they have been prevented from reading, seeing, and knowing the constraints placed on women. In the case of her own daughter, Offred is only able to glimpse an image of her child in a photograph, which Serena produces in order to coax Offred to sleep with Nick. What Offred realizes as she contemplates the photo is that her daughter will be deprived of the mother-daughter perspective of a mutual relationship:

Time has not stood still. It has washed over me, washed me away as if I'm nothing more than a woman of sand, left by a careless child too near the water. I have been obliterated for her. I am only a shadow now, far back behind the glib shiny surface of this photograph. A shadow of a shadow, as dead mothers become. You can see it in her eyes: I am not there. (228)

Here, Atwood introduces the idea of visual perspective as a metaphor to indicate that the mother's social position is unrepresented by the symbolic. "Far back behind the glib



shiny surface" of her daughter's photograph, Offred sees herself as "a shadow of a shadow," a dead mother reduced to a vanishing point within the patriarchal history of Gilead. In contemplating the mother-daughter relationship, Irigaray explains the phallogocentric economy that forbids women to constitute their subjectivity in relation to the feminine which is already caught up in a masculine economy that negates it: There is "no possibility whatsoever, within the current logic of sociocultural operations, for a daughter to situate herself with respect to her mother and neither can be identified with respect to the other" (143). Atwood represents this erasure of the mother from the social and cultural relations of patriarchal society, and this distancing between mother and daughter is made more profound when Offred describes her daughter being forcefully removed from her during their attempt to escape Gilead:

She's too young, it's too late, we come apart, my arms are held, and the edges go dark and nothing is left but a little window, a very little window, like the wrong end of a telescope. (75)

Patriarchy's destruction of the mother-daughter relationship is again described by Offred as an experience of vanishing.

The allusion to Ashbery's Self-Portrait is unmistakable as the poet rejects the lure of Parmigianino's invitation into the portrait's illusory depths: "withdraw that hand,/ Offer it no longer as shield or greeting. . ./There is room for one bullet in the chamber: /Our looking through the wrong end /Of the telescope as you fall back at a speed

/Faster than that of light to flatten ultimately /Among the features of the room" (ll. 525-32). In an attempt to finally dispel the illusory temptation of the portrait and the narcissism it evokes, Ashbery reduces the portrait/eye to "the mirrored, gibbous eye of an insect." Similarly, Atwood began her tale with the image of the multi-faceted ball of mirrors refracting light on the dance floor. Like Ashbery's image of the diminutive insect eye, the ball of mirrors suggests both momentary insight and defeat. While the revolving sphere sprinkles the dancers with light, it illuminates the dancing couples and the eroticization of sexual dominance which is a structural feature of patriarchy; at the same time, the sphere's fractured lights diminish this imbalance by casting a romantic hue over the dancers, disguising the hidden relations of male dominance.

Offred eventually realizes that there is a power even greater than the "taking" or deprivation which is patriarchy's strategy of oppression. She understands that the "power of forgiveness" is a unique power that defies relationships built on dominance since forgiveness is effective only in the context of reciprocity:

If you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, and you've made it this far, please remember: you will never be subject to the temptation or feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman. It's difficult to resist, believe me. But remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest. . . Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to

whom and get away with it. . . Maybe it's about  
who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it.  
Never tell me it amounts to the same thing.

(134-35)

If extending forgiveness subverts the patriarchal paradigm of dominance, Atwood suggests that the disposition required for accepting forgiveness may be what patriarchy must attain in order, finally, to accept woman on her own terms. Through a final "retraversal" of patriarchal mastery, Atwood envisions a balance of power relations between the sexes as non-hierarchical and only functional through complementarity. "Forgiveness," for Atwood, implies a gesture of "giving" prior to being victimized by "taking," a gesture that intercepts mastery or dominance even while it is being imposed. Atwood suggests that if the defeat of patriarchy is ever realized, women will have to cancel patriarchy's debt in order for the vicious cycle of mastery and dominance to run its course. Offred's discourse on forgiveness represents a counter-challenge or riposte to patriarchal oppression.

But if Offred extends the hope of reconciliation to patriarchy, no individual in the narrative begs her forgiveness. Her discourse on forgiveness addresses men in a future time, but the male scholars of the "Historical Notes" present a dismal reconstruction of the entire pre-Gilead world that led to the massive oppression of women depicted in The Handmaid's Tale. Atwood's tendentious exposé of academia as a paradigm for patriarchal abuse is

accomplished by her portrayal of the overbearing Dr. Piexoto whose sexist remarks punctuate a pedantic and esoteric lecture. The "Historical Notes" are aptly named since their future context contributes to the thematization of perspective which Offred's narrative develops. If Offred's insight from a "maternal perspective" demonstrates that women, especially as mothers, occupy a vanishing point in the scenography of patriarchal history, then the "Historical Notes" continue to diminish Offred as she fades further from the speculative concerns of male scholarship which is only interested in reconstructing the identities of Gilead's Commanders. The identity of Offred is obfuscated in part by the scholar's refusal to see the constraints of the reproductive-maternal function as limiting women's subjectivity when childbearing becomes the only valid measure of her worth:

As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day. (311)

Offred is not only denied subjectivity by the male scholars who perform research on her text, but her voice (comprising the entire text they study) is obscured by their refusal to interpret the historical context which imposed her maternal role, "the matrix out of which" she speaks. Atwood's choice of the term "matrix" can be read as a

figurative womb, the conflation of "context" and "maternal" which inform her position as speaking subject. But the significance of this maternal context from which Offred speaks is denied by the speculating professor who does not consider her a worthwhile topic for scholarly investigation. Furthermore, the plight of women during the Gileadean regime is dismissed and belittled in the interest of maintaining a scholarly distance that is not "culture-specific" (302). This guise of objectivity literally accomplishes the distancing effect that Offred understands as the mother's position in the vanishing point of history.

The title "Historical Notes" further indicates that the epilogue can be read as a gloss for the narrative portion of The Handmaid's Tale. Functioning as a gloss, the "Historical Notes" testify to the existence of patriarchy as self-perpetuating, or in Irigaray's terms, "self-reproducing." Writing under the guise of textual authority, the male scholar edits whatever challenges patriarchal hegemony, and the glossing or interpretation he provides becomes a commentary on the academic institution itself.

The Handmaid's Tale thus becomes a scathing indictment of academia as a scene for repression and patriarchal power, not only when read from the vantage point of the "Historical Notes," but also in regard to the setting of the novel itself. Just as Atwood foregrounds the historical language of patriarchy in the scene where Offred discovers the

"schoolboy's Latin" text, she similarly employs Latinate derivatives in prominent scenes. For example, the term "gloss" indicates the glossaria or notes used as Biblical commentary during the Middle Ages. Also, the novel begins in a "gymnasium" where Offred is being tutored as a Handmaid. Atwood's ironic choice of location for women's "re-education" refers historically to the secondary school young men attended after completion of grammar school. It is not coincidental that the Eyes' headquarters are located in an old university dining hall where women were ritually humiliated in college pranks and that the final "salvaging" or execution occurs on a campus quadrangle:

To the tolling bell we walk along the paths once used by students, past buildings that were once lecture halls and dormitories. It's very strange to be in here again. From the outside you can't tell that anything's changed, except that the blinds on most of the windows are drawn down. These buildings belong to the Eyes now. (272)

The university as a locus for patriarchal oppression becomes more insidious in the salvaging scene when Offred describes the condemned Wives and Handmaid: "All of them sit on folding wooden chairs, like graduating students who are about to be given prizes" (273). After the women are hanged, their bodies are displayed on the Wall for public view:

The blue one is in the middle, the two red ones on either side, though the colors are no longer as bright; they seem to have faded, grown dingy, like dead butterflies or tropical fish drying on land. The gloss is off them. We stand and look at them in silence. (my emphasis; 284)

Offred's description of this scene reinforces the notion that patriarchal representation is only a means of reproducing itself, and the passage signifies on both literal and metaphorical levels. In death, the gloss or sheen of a living organism disappears, but the passage also indicates that the understanding of sexual difference imposed by patriarchal culture loses authority only at the time of an individual woman's death. Offred begins to see the ideology of sexual difference fade as the "glossing" effect of patriarchy's values become meaningless in the context of death.

This scene establishes a particular affinity with the "Historical Notes" in that the glossaria of male commentary continues to determine the parameters of feminine subjectivity in the future setting of the "Historical Notes." The male research team editing Offred's narrative does not search for her identity in the gaps of her narrative, nor do they try to reconstruct her voice from the painful silences and censorship she alludes to. Her oppression is taken for granted with frightening disregard as Piexoto's lecture obliterates concern for Offred's subjectivity. In his effort to reconstruct the Commander's identity, Professor Piexoto expresses a nostalgia for the lost origins of Gilead. However, in affirming the structures of dominance that oppress women, he inadvertently exposes the abusive patriarchal practices which he "glosses"

over with humorous remarks. Falsely interpreting the oppression depicted in Offred's narrative is a form of glossing that lends a sheen to patriarchal ideology, just as the shiny surface of the photograph of Offred's daughter fails to illuminate Offred's shadowy presence behind her daughter. The deceptively pleasant tone and smoothly polished intellect of Piexoto add another layer of veneer to the luster of patriarchal ideology that the gloss protects.

One of Atwood's images for the self-reflecting ideology of sexual difference that entraps women--two mirrors facing each other and producing infinite identical images--becomes a trope for reading The Handmaid's Tale, since Atwood directs her reader's attention to a future which becomes reproduced in the "Historical Notes." If Offred's narrative represents a retraversal of patriarchal thought and practice, it must also be read with the sobering realization that her resistance is inscribed within a text which has already been edited by the male scholars whose reading chooses to ignore or gloss over both its author and the historical context of her writing. Therefore, Offred's mother's prediction that "history will absolve me" remains unfulfilled since the "Historical Notes" deny her existence and ignore the significance of the social conditions she fought against. As with two mirrors facing each other, patriarchal history in The Handmaid's Tale becomes an



infinite reflection of sameness in its endless repetition of patriarchal ideology from one generation to the next.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I refer to representative studies such as Harriet F. Bergmann's "'Teaching Them to Read': A Fishing Expedition in The Handmaid's Tale," College English 51.8 (1989): 847-54, and David Ketterer's "Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale: A Contextual Dystopia," Science Fiction Studies 16.2 (1989): 209-17. Bergmann argues that Atwood's future setting is crucial in Offred's movement from passively accepting the Gileadean regime to reading the world around her skeptically, a political position that accounts for her survival and subsequent "production" of her narrative. Ketterer argues that the novel represents the genre of science fiction and must be read "contextually" between our present time and the historical future presented in the epilogue. Both essays offer careful textual analyses of The Handmaid's Tale, but Ketterer's and Bergmann's emphasis on the futuristic setting distracts them from reading women's oppression as presented in the novel in terms of social commentary on present day patriarchal culture and feminism's partial success in addressing that oppression.

<sup>2</sup> Like all Handmaids in the novel, the identity of the female narrator Offred has been suppressed in that the patriarchy has renamed her according to the given name of the man with whom she is supposed to conceive children. Therefore, Offred's name, literally "of Fred," represents the erasure of women's identity and signifies her ownership by the patriarchal state. As Handmaids are reassigned to different households, their names must be changed accordingly.

<sup>3</sup> See especially pages 111-12 of The Handmaid's Tale. Note that the racist strategies of Gilead's male leaders gradually become apparent as their sexist agenda unfolds in the novel in that the heightened concern over declining population is undercut by Gilead's expulsion of non-white races. This example is only one scenario where Atwood suggests a political alignment between women and racial minorities against patriarchal hegemony.

<sup>4</sup> See Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986) 61. All subsequent references will be cited in the text.

<sup>5</sup> See Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference, ed. Deborah L. Rhode (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990) 3. Further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>6</sup> See Luce Irigaray's This Sex Which Is Not One, translated by Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell, 1985). All subsequent references follow this edition and are cited in the text.

<sup>7</sup> See "The Feminine Look" in Theory between the Disciplines: Authority/Vision/Politics, Martin Kreiswirth and Mark A. Cheetham, eds. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1990) 194. Subsequent references to this essay are cited within the text.

<sup>8</sup> Irigaray clearly situates her critique of Freud in the recognition that psychoanalysis does not sufficiently "question its own historical determinants," that is, the material and political contexts on which it bases its assumptions (This Sex 125). According to Irigaray, Freud brought to light something that had been operative all along though it remained implicit, hidden, unknown: the sexual indifference that underlies the truth of any science, the logic of every discourse. This indifference is readily apparent in Freud's definition of female sexuality. In fact, this sexuality is never defined with respect to any sex but the masculine. Freud does not see two sexes whose differences are articulated in the act of intercourse, and, more generally speaking, in the imaginary and symbolic processes that regulate the workings of society and a culture. The 'feminine' is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy. . . . All Freud's statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex might have its own "specificity" (This Sex 69).

<sup>9</sup> Carole-Anne Tyler states that "Irigaray deconstructs the opposition between metaphor and metonymy, a necessary operation that according to Gallop has both a metaphorical and metonymic relation to the binarism of sexual difference. This deconstruction enables a reconstruction of feminine difference and of a feminine imaginary that, paradoxically, is a kind of symbolic in that it is characterized by speech or representation; such an imaginary deconstructs the opposition between symbolic and imaginary as well" (199). See "The Feminine Look," 191-212.

<sup>10</sup> See also Monique Wittig's essay "Homo Sum," in Feminist Issues 10.1 (1990): 3-11. Wittig examines how Aristotle's conceptual thinking introduced the idea of dualism as a basis for differentiation and how binary oppositions eventually became conflated with ethical concepts. Wittig therefore accounts for the masculine

privileging of metaphysical concepts such as "the one" over "the many" which becomes associated with the feminine.

<sup>11</sup> I borrow the concept of the eroticization of dominance from Catherine MacKinnon's essay "Desire and Power: A Feminist Perspective" in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 105-121.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Gay explains the context of Freud's famous mystification of feminine psychology, "What do women want?": As late as 1928, he told Ernest Jones that "everything we know of feminine early development appears to me unsatisfactory and uncertain." He had, he thought, sincerely tried to understand the "sexual life of the adult woman," but it continued to intrigue and puzzle him. It was something of "a dark continent."

About the time that Freud confessed his bafflement to Ernest Jones, he told Marie Bonaparte that he had been doing research into "the feminine soul" for thirty years, with little to show for it. He asked, "Was will das Weib?"

See Freud: A Life for Our Time (Markham, Ontario: W. W. Norton, 1988) 501.

<sup>13</sup> See "The Politics of Radical Feminism" in Alison M. Jagger's Feminist Politics and Human Nature, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983) 249-301.

<sup>14</sup> See "Castration or Decapitation?" in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 7.1 (1981): 41-55.

<sup>15</sup> See "The Pervasiveness of Patriarchy: On Finding a Different Voice" in Feminist Thought and the Structure of Knowledge, ed. Mary McCanney Gergen (New York: New York U P, 1988) 78. Logan does not dismiss radical feminist movements but wishes to emphasize the "deeply sedimented" social practices of patriarchy, that is, its "continually self-reproducing nature" (71).

<sup>16</sup> Atwood's writing and publication of The Handmaid's Tale (1985) foreshadows the major events leading to the crisis of women's reproductive rights in North American society during the latter half of the 1980's and early 1990's.

<sup>17</sup> If Gilead's population crisis is patriarchy's justification for its restriction of women to the maternal function, then the banning of reproductive technologies is a logical contradiction in the novel. I argue in the

beginning of this essay that Gileadean authority, like other patriarchal structures, is ultimately concerned with the containment of women. Instead of slowing population decline by the practice of artificial insemination, the aged Commanders repeatedly rape Handmaids during the monthly conception rituals. In the Birth Day rituals, Handmaids constantly experience a sense of failure for not being able to conceive and bear children, and this sense of inferiority structurally reinforces patriarchal dominance. In The Handmaid's Tale, patriarchy ritualizes the humiliation of women as a strategy to contain them.

<sup>18</sup> See Atwood's Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (Toronto: Anansi, 1972) for an outline of Atwood's "four basic victim positions" (36-40). See her restatement of these victim positions in feminist terms in Second Words: Selected Critical Prose (Toronto: Anansi, 1982) 144-145. For a slightly different perspective, see Judith Williamson's essay "Woman is an Island: Femininity and Colonization" in Tania Modleski's Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1986), where she argues that capitalism must create an "other" or victim to fuel its economy; here she refers to examples from advertising where woman is victimized by this logic.

<sup>19</sup> Irigaray detects this dominance at work in Freud's logic which defines women's "sexual function" in terms of penis envy: "The desire to obtain the penis from the father is replaced by the desire to have a child, this latter becoming, in a equivalence that Freud analyzes, the penis substitute" (her emphasis; This Sex 41). According to Freud's thinking, since women's sexual desire is caught up in her desire of the penis, her inevitable "narcissistic humiliation inevitably associated with the feminine condition" is relieved (and always only partially) through childbirth (This Sex 41). The child, preferably male, ultimately reflects her father, the origin of her desire. Within this logic of dominance, women "achieve" femininity only through childbirth.

<sup>20</sup> Irigaray sees the child as woman's compensation for her exclusion from the symbolic and as a diversion from a masculine economy that represses feminine desire (27).

<sup>21</sup> In her study "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey argues that the complicity of conventional cinema with the male viewing perspective allows the male's gaze to become one with the film hero's point of view. The male viewer not only finds narcissistic pleasure in his identification with the hero, but his gaze turns women into

objects of voyeurism and fetishism. See Screen 16.3 (1975): 6-18.

<sup>22</sup> The symbol of the eye traditionally represents the all-knowing God in Christian theology but also carries secular associations pertaining to concepts of knowledge and wisdom; Offred also recalls that the motto printed on U.S. currency, "In God We Trust," is accompanied by an eye enclosed in a pyramid or triangle, reminding her of a witticism from her past: "'In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash.' That would be blasphemy now" [173]); the wings further reinforce the idea of transcendence since they suggest angels, but wings are also commonly identified on military insignia; both the religious and military significations of wings are represented in the duties of Gilead's ranks of "Angels."

<sup>23</sup> Compare the following passages from the King James Version of Psalm 33. 13-14; 18):

The Lord looketh from heaven; he beholdeth  
all the sons of men.

From the place of his habitation he looketh  
upon all the inhabitants of the earth.

Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon them  
that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy.

<sup>24</sup> The term "Aunt," although suggestive of familial relations, obscures the fact that they act as mediators between the patriarchal authority and the Handmaids. Gilead, through the creation of the gendered class of Aunts, institutes a system whereby women dominate and punish other women, permitting men to bear only indirect responsibility for female oppression. In contemporary society, many feminists justly point out this same abuse in hiring and promotion procedures as well as in working conditions for women who are employed in male-dominated institutions.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler states the same idea when she analyzes Irigaray's reading of Simone de Beauvoir on women's sexuality: "On Irigaray's reading, Beauvoir's claim that woman 'is sex' is reversed to mean that she is not the sex she is designated to be, but, rather, the masculine sex encore (and en corps) parading in the mode of otherness." See Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (London: Routledge, 1990) 12.

<sup>26</sup> See Section III of this chapter where I discuss the evolution of dress in the novel from styles based on gender difference to the eventual appearance of uni-sex clothing prior to the Gilead regime. Atwood suggests patriarchy's anxiety over the superficial blurring of gender differences

through unisex clothing, which results in their codification of dress styles according to gender roles.

<sup>27</sup> Irigaray's neologism, a combinant of "specular" (the predominance of the visual) and "speculation" (the domination of the philosophic logos), becomes a central critical term in This Sex Which is Not One.

<sup>28</sup> See Linda Christian-Smith's essay "Gender, Popular Culture, and Curriculum" in Curriculum Inquiry 17.4 (1987): 363-406.

<sup>29</sup> See The Handmaid's Tale, 127.

<sup>30</sup> See Elisabeth Badinter's The Unopposite Sex. In her chapter on "The Death of Patriarchy," Badinter describes this same "whore/madonna" attitude in the context of describing the opposition against the establishment of birth-control clinics in Western Europe during the early 1900's: "The medical and ecclesiastical hierarchies insisted that a woman who refuses to have children 'no longer deserves her rights; she no longer exists. . . If she remains voluntarily sterile, she is no better than a prostitute'" (128).

<sup>31</sup> See Christian-Smith's discussion of the three ideological codes that construct female sexual identity in romance fiction: beauty, romance, and sexuality. Smith explains how society encourages woman in the pursuit of beauty to assume the roles of both consumer and consumer object. Irigaray's essay "Women on the Market" shares this view of women's social construction as commodities. See also Chapter 8 of This Sex Which Is Not One, 170-91; and Chapter 9, "Commodities among Themselves," 192-97.

<sup>32</sup> Milton's Sonnet XIX suggests the contemplative alternative to active service of God. Aunt Lydia's invokes Milton's poem in the context of relating the parable of the seeds. In doing this, she enforces the idea of female passivity: the seed falling among the rich soil and growing to bear fruit is, of course, the Handmaid who successfully endures her role and gives birth to a healthy infant. Her "activity" consists only in waiting to become impregnated.

<sup>33</sup> Alloula analyzes picture postcards of Algerian women, produced and used for correspondence by the French in Algeria during the early 1900's. Barbara Harlow, in her introduction to Alloula's book, writes: "The postcards present thirty years of French colonial presence in Algeria and illustrate its distorting effects on Algerian society" (xiii). Harlow explains that for the colonizing powers, Arab women signified the "phantasmic representations of

Western designs on the Orient" and that the possession of women "came to serve as a surrogate for and means to political and military conquest of the Arab world" (xiv-xv).

<sup>34</sup> The scene is a reversal of the racial stereotyping perpetrated by Western tourists in non-Western countries. Hortense Spillers refers to this activity as the same "scopophilic behavior for colonizing and enslaving powers toward 'peoples of color'" by which early European discourses of "discovery" constructed Caribbean and Native American peoples as "savage." The idea of the Americas, according to Spillers, has been "'made up' in the gaze of Europe." See "Who Cuts the Border? Some Readings on America," Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text, ed. Hortense Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991) 4-5.

<sup>35</sup> Harlow quotes this passage from Khatibi's Maghreb pluriel (Paris: Denoel, 1983) 47-48.

<sup>36</sup> For Irigaray, retraversing metaphysical discourse means a literal crossing back through, a reexamination of the symbolic order that is grounded in the masculine imaginary.

<sup>37</sup> I agree with Tyler when she states that it is not the intentions of woman's mimicry that distinguishes between mimicry and masquerade: "The best of intentions do not necessarily make a difference in man's relation to images of woman. . . . Watching the women who seem to be the imaginary women they are only seeming to be may not threaten masculine voyeurism and fetishism, which sustain the patriarchal symbolic" (198). Tyler correctly points to Irigaray's theoretical blind side which considers only gender differences "and not the other factors that comprise difference within the categories 'man' and 'woman': such as class, race, ethnicity, and sexual preference" (198).

<sup>38</sup> Atwood's uses of the mirror in her fiction have been widely discussed. For example, see Pamela S. Bromberg's "The Two Faces of the Mirror in The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle" in Margaret Atwood: Vision and Form, Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, eds. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois U P, 1988) 12-23. See also Jessie Givner's "Mirror Images in Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle," Studies in Canadian Literature 14.1 (1989) 139-146.

<sup>39</sup> Irigaray is fully aware that her critique of patriarchy as a visual or specular economy must involve the use of the same "speculative" tools of philosophical discourse. But she distinguishes a difference within her methodology: "The tool is not a feminine attribute. But



woman may re-utilize its marks on her, in her. . . . [in order to] get back inside their ever so coherent systems" (150).

<sup>40</sup> See "The Two Faces in the Mirror in The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle" in Margaret Atwood: Vision and Form, 12. Further references to Bromberg are cited within the text.

<sup>41</sup> Bromberg argues that the two heroines, Marian MacAlpin (The Edible Woman) and Joan Foster (Lady Oracle), subvert "the nineteenth-century plot of romantic desire" that would entrap women and reduce them to the status of objects. Yet, Bromberg admits that both stories end ambiguously since each woman remains only partially free from the "dominant scopic economy" (23).

<sup>42</sup> See Cixous's "Castration or Decapitation" in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 7.1 (1981), especially pages 43-45.

<sup>43</sup> See La Belle, Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1988) 76.

<sup>44</sup> See H.W. Janson's History of Art (1962; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969) 375.

<sup>45</sup> See Freedberg's Parmigianino: His Works in Painting, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1950) 104.

<sup>46</sup> The relationship between the illusions of depth and lucidity is delineated in Anita Sokolsky's provocative essay "'A Commission That Never Materialized': Narcissism and Lucidity in John Ashbery's Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." See Modern Critical Views: John Ashbery, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House, 1985) 233-250. References to John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" are taken from the Viking Edition (New York, 1972).

<sup>47</sup> See The Politics of Postmodernism, 1-29.

<sup>48</sup> In Speculum of the Other Woman, Irigaray speaks of this disturbing of representation in similarly disruptive terms: ". . . in a concave mirror with a vertical generatrix, man may be reflected upside down. The concave mirror's potential for setting things afire is not mentioned" (149).

<sup>49</sup> See Gayatri Spivak's The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, and Dialogues (London: Routledge, 1990) for a definition of perspective as the inescapable positioning of the self or the necessity of "clearing a representative space" from which to speak (45-46).

## Conclusion

My interest in this study began with the question of how contemporary women writers of English fiction produce feminist critique through the representation of women whose identities are partially constructed through experiences of mothering. In first selecting Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook, Alice Walker's The Color Purple, and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, I did not anticipate the range of inquiry this focus would generate or the variety of discourses organized around the maternal that would emerge from each text. I remark in my Introduction that all three of these novels are multi-layered narratives which demand creative reading strategies. In approaching maternal aspects of each narrative, I mapped a reading strategy that is consonant with contemporary critical dialogues whose interests lie primarily in the intersections between feminisms and postmodernism. Briefly, this approach resists essentialist and ahistorical readings of maternity by acknowledging the specific historical and cultural contexts of each novel's publication, as well as the context of its fictional setting. Drawing on a variety of feminist interventions and a post-structuralist understanding of intertextuality known as postmodern parody, I argue in the previous chapters that The Golden Notebook, The Color Purple, and The Handmaid's Tale present compelling evidence

that Lessing, Walker, and Atwood, respectively, are more than late twentieth-century experimentalists, but rather practitioners of a discourse that can be designated as feminist-postmodern fiction.

In my reading of these three texts, singular issues emerge within separate chapters which, when taken together, suggest a similar feminist-postmodern agenda underlying each novel. These various issues raised by the focus on maternity in all three texts could be inscribed and discussed under one inclusive category, the problem of women's cultural production, which is a common concern for each writer. This problem manifests itself in each novel as a number of related feminist concerns: the disruption of women's transmission of culture through the discontinuity of mothers' and daughters' experiences, the containment of women within the maternal function, the exclusion of women from patriarchal history, and the alignment of local practices of sexism and the domestic abuse of women with international imperialism. In addition, each novel involves the subversive literary appropriation of other writers to effect feminist critique. While some of these issues are more obviously foregrounded by a single author, they nevertheless reappear as subtexts in the other two novels. What is startling and provocative about a conjunctive reading of these three texts as maternal discourses is the

extent of philosophical accord, both feminist and postmodernist, between Lessing, Walker, and Atwood.

Each of these novels is narrated by a woman whose maternal experience, either as a biological relationship or as a social identity, inflects her writing. Celie's establishment of a network of maternal and sororal relations in her letters indicates Walker's concern for reconstructing a matrilineal literary tradition for African-American women writers, marking the production of The Color Purple as a "womanist" text. With a similar concern, Lessing emphasizes the value of women's perspectives by foregrounding women narrators whose subjectivities depend on their experiences of motherhood. The centrality of mothers as writers and narrators, first in Lessing's production of drama and subsequently in The Golden Notebook, constitutes a feminist innovation in post-war British cultural production from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s. In The Handmaid's Tale, the narrator Offred speaks from within a patriarchally-defined women's culture which creates artificial alliances among women by constructing their roles solely around the reproductive function. The political context of Atwood's setting, determined by the enforcement of women's reproductive function, suggests a similarity between the social order contested by women's movements in contemporary patriarchal societies and women's condition of subjugation and enslavement by the hyper-patriarchal society of Gilead,

which violently retaliates against women for assuming sexual autonomy. For Walker, Lessing, and Atwood, the delineation of maternal relations in their fiction becomes a significant means of evaluating and affirming aspects of women's culture in contemporary social contexts.

By focusing on women narrators who are writers of their own histories, Lessing, Walker, and Atwood call attention to how women's writing problematizes the construction of women's identities as mothers and how society reproduces the values that delegitimize autonomous maternal relations in order to sustain patriarchal power. For Lessing, women's culture exists primarily within the private sphere through personal friendships, such as that between Anna and Molly, and through women's domestic relations as mothers with their children. Anticipating the formal organization of national women's movements in Britain, Lessing's novel enacts various discourses about maternal relations to interrogate different political and public discourses that inform the ideologies of such institutions as the British Communist Party or the British colonial presence in Rhodesia.

Whereas Lessing faces the problem of dissolving traditional barriers between a public realm dominated by a masculine symbolic system and the private sphere which restricts women's discourse to domestic concerns, Walker confronts the challenge of reconstructing an African-American maternal history whose cultural production was

suppressed by the institution of slavery and which remains largely anonymous today. The Color Purple, set within the American South during the early decades of the twentieth century, foregrounds the negative social effects of racial segregation and the domestic subjugation of women by men which shape African-American women's identities. Walker's creation of a womanist culture is effected through Celie's epistolary discourse which constructs a web of maternal relations, many of which are based on historical persons from Walker's life whose creativity as women becomes documented in the novel. In this sense, The Color Purple as a text suggests an analogy between the traditional women's art of quilting and the production of women's culture in that Celie produces women's history by fitting together women's stories such that each section of her narrative, like quilting scraps, simultaneously testifies to its origin in as well as demonstrates its interdependence on other stories, forming one fabric.

The creation of women's history is problematized in The Handmaid's Tale as Offred frequently admits that her story is "a reconstruction." Her narrative is a process of negotiating between two identities: the first, constructed in the past where she experienced sexual, social, and political autonomy, and her present identity which testifies to patriarchy's abolition of all women's rights. The theme of socially institutionalizing and enforcing maternity leads

to an explicit contrast between the relatively autonomous social conditions of contemporary women and the possibility of their complete subjugation by patriarchy. In her novel, Atwood foregrounds the vulnerability of women's culture and the ease with which patriarchy can disrupt the growth and continuity of women's experiences.

In the historical settings of both Lessing's and Walker's novels, women's cultural influence is still largely contained within the domestic and private spheres. In The Golden Notebook, however, Anna Wulf's professional development as a writer, her active membership in the British Communist Party, and her sexual relationships are clearly challenges to conventional ideas about feminine and maternal roles. In a similar way, Celie begins to defy the constraints placed on her when she rejects the patriarchal God she has been addressing in her writing, and more importantly, as a social corollary to this rejection, when she denounces Albert and his abuse of her. Celie's rejection of God and Albert also represents a rejection of her arbitrarily imposed maternal role in Albert's family, a move which allows her to establish her economic independence and to reconstruct her original but disrupted maternal relations with her children, her sister Nettie, as well as other women who sustain Celie throughout her years of hardship. Like Celie's relations with her children, Anna Wulf's relationship with her child is disrupted, although

not as violently as in Celie's case. In The Golden Notebook, Anna's heterosexual relationships frequently interrupt the mother-daughter companionship, sometimes with hostility. Lessing foregrounds the disturbing social opposition which "free women" of the 1950s face when confronted with the competing demands of children and male lovers. Also, Anna's discursive strategy of using maternal relations to intervene in narratives about communism or colonialism reinforce the fact that the political sphere did not readily accommodate women's participation. Both Celie and Anna demonstrate that their maternal relations are partly responsible for their recognition and rejection of patriarchal values that would exclude or constrain them.

Therefore, The Handmaid's Tale can be read as an inversion of The Golden Notebook and The Color Purple in that Offred describes the return of women to the confinements of domesticity and maternity from which Anna and Celie respectively extricate themselves. By recording her memories, Offred reconstructs her past relationships with her mother and daughter, from whom she has been separated. Her reconstruction contemplates the destructive effect of patriarchy on women's culture as daughters lose the memory of their mothers and become ideologically reprogrammed to construct their identities solely through the reproductive function. Fulfilling similar feminist agendas, Lessing, Walker, and Atwood establish clear



connections between the problem of women's cultural production and the obstacles of patriarchy which disrupt the transmission of women's experiences and mold their social identities to conform to the biological and social tasks of reproduction.

In demonstrating how patriarchy obstructs the creation and transmission of women's culture, Lessing, Walker, and Atwood expose the institution of patriarchy as a historical phenomenon, primarily through feminist interventions that demystify male dominance and oppression. In The Golden Notebook, Lessing accomplishes this by exposing the contradictions in heterosexual romance ideology which demand that women lose their autonomy and assume a childlike complicity in their romantic relationships with men, while at the same time, men paradoxically expect that women will provide them with maternal as well as sexual sustenance. In The Color Purple, Celie's challenging of the prevalent belief in a white male God and her reconstruction of a maternal God defies the dominance and oppression suggested by the white patriarchal image. Similarly, she reconstructs African etiological myths according to maternal metaphors, and her transmission of these stories to Albert suggests that violence over racial differences can be resolved by appealing to a common maternal origins. Through her insistence on maternal images and metaphors, Celie begins to

write a feminist history that does not exclude the importance of the mother's role.

Again, The Handmaid's Tale presents an opposing point of view by demonstrating patriarchy's tendency to discount women's intervention in history by submerging their identities in domestic and maternal relations that are inoperative in the public sphere. Offred's subversive strategy to counteract this obliteration is to expose patriarchy's tendency to forget, erase, or silence women in male-authored histories. Not only is Offred effectively silenced during her entire narrative, but Atwood's historical appendix to the novel condemns patriarchal approaches to history which focus on reconstructing men's identities but ignoring and dismissing women and their contributions to the production of culture.

In considering the obstacles to women's cultural production, Lessing, Walker, and Atwood suggest an analogy between local instances of patriarchal abuse of women and global cases of imperialism. In The Golden Notebook, Marie and her child are victims of George Hounslow's patriarchal assumption of the child's identity. His relationship with Marie reflects the large-scale abuses on the indigenous Rhodesian population by its white, European minority. In the African narrative of The Color Purple, the patriarchal belief that maternity is foundational for women's identity sets the stage for Corrine's crisis of belief in her own

maternal identity and the identities of her adopted children. Walker uses this scene of crisis to comment on the complicity of religious evangelization with the colonial usurpation of Africa's land and the destruction of its culture. For Atwood, women are already colonized victims within patriarchal society. She demonstrates this belief through the exaggerated representation of Gilead's patriarchy which literally colonizes women by appropriating their bodies as national resources to reproduce itself.

Finally, The Golden Notebook, The Color Purple, and The Handmaid's Tale resist the appropriation and dismissal of women's culture by employing the discursive strategy of postmodern parody. Lessing's subversive adaptation of the Brechtian gest uses discourses about maternal relations to alienate and thereby expose the totalizing pretense of various metanarratives that inform the ideologies of British colonialism, Jungian psychoanalysis, or the British Communist Party. Walker's parodic encoding of Jane Eyre in Nettie's story not only calls attention to the past dismissal of black women writers in the literary canon, but it is also Walker's way of repositioning herself in that prior tradition as well as defining a new tradition for African-American women writers. Not unlike Lessing's and Walker's use of postmodern parody, Atwood's parodic echoing of John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" emphasizes the constraints for women within a specular and

phallomorphic culture. Appropriating a subversive strategy of mimicry similar to Luce Irigaray's "retraversal" of the masculine specular economy, Atwood's narrator turns the specular constraints of Gilead back on itself to reflect its patriarchal oppression, thereby exposing its self-reflecting logic. Through the use of postmodern parody to effect feminist criticism, Lessing, Walker, and Atwood participate in a discursive practice that is decidedly both feminist and postmodernist. Their selection of maternal narrators as a central focus for writing feminist-postmodernist fiction places them in the vanguard of contemporary women writers who are committed to the ongoing task of producing and transmitting women's culture.

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DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

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**Major Field:** English

**Title of Dissertation:** Discourses of Maternity and the Postmodern Narrative:  
A Study of Lessing, Walker, and Atwood

**Approved:**

Patrick M. ...  
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Daniel Fogel  
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