

Postmodern Motherhood and Ethnicity: Maternal Discourse in Late Twentieth-Century American Literature

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I INTRODUCTION: POSTMODERNISM, ETHNICITY, AND MOTHERHOOD

It has been more than a quarter of the century since a large number of women of color have emerged as productive and innovative writers in the United States. African Americans such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, Asian Americans such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, Native Americans such as Leslie Silko and Louise Erdrich, just to name a few, immediately come to mind. Their works have often been read as the expression of lived experiences or as documentation of specific cultures useful for sociological analysis but not for theoretical or philosophical insights which are relevant to the larger society. However, it is more and more obvious that their works embody the fragmented and decentered self that are often attributed only to white male postmodern theorists and creative writers. In fact, "fictional works by women of color, and especially their "fictional representation of motherhood, can even be viewed as the most ambitious and representative examples of postmodern American literature in the last two decades. While we tend to look for typical examples of literary postmodernism in such authors as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Donald Barthelme, some critics claim that postmodernism and postmodern theory have much to contribute to and gain from the discourses of marginalized cultures, such as those of ethnic minorities, the working classes, and women.

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For example, in her essay “Postmodern Blackness,” bell hooks advocates the importance of postmodern theory, but claims that while postmodern theorists are concerned with “difference” and “Otherness,” they ignore the existence and contribution of African Americans, especially black women. hooks claims that not only is postmodern theory relevant to African American experiences and culture, but “the overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance” (27). She criticizes white male postmodern theorists who “speak to and about one another with coded familiarity” (24), and proposes an alternative radical postmodernist practice, which will “incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed black people” (25).

In accordance with hooks, Phillip Harper, in his *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture*, focuses on race, class and gender as crucial elements in comprehending postmodern literary discourse. He demonstrates that so-called postmodern characteristics, such as fragmentation and decenteredness, have been severely felt, and in fact acutely represented, by white women writers such as Anaïs Nin and African American male and female writers such as Ralph Ellison and Gwendolyn Brooks. As Harper states in his analysis of Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon, While Brownsville Mother Loiters” and her novel *Maude Martha*, black motherhood represented in these works does not show, as some critics have claimed, the universality of maternal feelings and the possibility of black and white women’s solidarity through their common maternal identity. Rather, in “Mississippi Mother,” Brooks’ juxtaposition of a white and a black mother succeeds in illustrating the “variety and specificity of experiences that constitute the array of subjectivities in the social body of the United States” and in exposing the falseness of an ostensible universality of maternal experience (103). In *Maude Martha* as well, the protagonist’s anger seems to be presented as universally maternal, since it is articulated most explicitly as a mother’s anger over her child being ignored by Santa Claus in a department store. Harper points out that Maude’s anger is maternal but also racial as well because Santa Claus is friendly and attentive to white children. He suggests that Maude’s subjectivity is fragmented because it is maternal, since it is materialized “only when she projects it away from herself and into the context of another’s experience” (114). He also points out, however, that this fragmented anger is racially specific, since

her anger is expressed only in the least threatening form to the existing social structure, namely, desire to participate in the “mainstream” economy as a consumer (115).

In this essay I intend to demonstrate the ways that literary representations of motherhood by women of ethnic minority groups are representative of postmodern creativity. For this purpose, I will first present a brief overview of the development of feminist theories of motherhood and show how women of color’s maternal discourse may be crucial in examining both postmodern realities and theories of postmodernism. I will then demonstrate briefly how ethnic women authors such as Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Maxine Hong Kingston make use of the concept of motherhood and of various strategies of maternal discourses to represent not only their realities but also U.S. society as a whole.

II FEMINIST MOTHERHOOD THEORIES FROM 1970S TO THE PRESENT

What is the relationship between motherhood and creativity? What kind of mechanism is working when a mother writes and speaks as a subject? These have been major concerns of feminist scholars in general and feminist literary critics in particular. Feminist scholarship on mother figures and maternal discourse has been influenced by Freudian psychoanalytic theory, while shifting the focus of attention from the oedipal father-child relationship to the pre-oedipal mother-child relationship. This can be seen, for example, in Nancy Chodorow’s influential *Reproduction of Mothering*. Adrienne Rich, in her *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience* and other essays, has emphasized the importance of mother-daughter relationships as the prototype of women-to-women nurturing and affectionate relationships and, thus, the source of female creativity. Those who are generally called “French feminists,” namely Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, who draw from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical and linguistic theories, also emphasize the importance of the pre-oedipal mother-child relationship and have been influential in American feminist scholarship. Julia Kristeva has been especially attractive to those who focus on motherhood and discourse since she presents the maternal as the source of poetic language and subversive power.

In the 1980s, feminists’ interests in mothers as subjects grew, and they began to explore the representation of motherhood from a mother’s point

of view. Marianne Hirsch, in her *Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, questions why mothers' stories (such as Oedipus' mother Jocasta's) are seldom told from the mothers' point of view. Hirsch points out that women, including feminists, tend to speak and write as daughters more than they do as mothers. What Hirsch calls "maternal discourse" has indeed been scarce among literary works and feminist scholarship. Existing theories on motherhood and mother-daughter relationships are mostly written from a daughter's point of view, and reflect the feminist daughter's ambivalence and sometimes resentment and hatred toward her mother and mother figures. Many theorists such as Susan Rubin Suleiman point out that when a woman speaks as a mother, her narrative tends to split in two: herself as a mother, and also as a daughter of her mother (Suleiman, 22). One of the best examples of this split subjectivity of a mother is Kim Chernin's *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Her Mother*. As the title shows, the women in this book, including the narrator herself, present themselves as daughters even when they talk about their parenting experiences or about "giving birth."

Moreover, while women writers have started to write in what Hirsch calls "maternal discourse," it does not mean that they are writing as a unified entity. I do not agree with Suleiman's statement in her *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* that mothers, regardless of their class, ethnic, or national backgrounds, share certain common experiences (55–63). On the contrary, their maternal voices have demonstrated the postmodernity played out in one of the supposedly most stable identities that women have had. It may be because, as Hirsch and others point out, that we are all daughters, but not all of us are mothers. Or it may be that as Barbara Johnson argues in "Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion," that all human discourse originates in an infant's call to its mother, and, thus, it is far easier and common to write as a child than as a mother (706). Hirsch argues that mothers' voices in literature, such as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," should be listened to more closely in order for us to be liberated out of the Freudian framework and from the binary pattern of attachment and domination in human relationships. Her critique of daughter(child)-centric psychoanalytical theory and her urge to go beyond that framework and to take historical and political aspects of motherhood into consideration are shared by many contemporary feminist theorists and literary critics. For example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan

Gubar in *No Man's Land Volume 3: Letters from the Front*, point out the emergence of "mother writers" in contemporary literature in a historically unprecedented way. Suleiman in *Risking Who One Is* and Susanna Walters in her *Lives Together, Worlds Apart*, which is concerned with mother-daughter relationships in films, also argue for focusing on mothers as subjects and for going beyond the psychoanalytical framework.

Still others pay attention to the possibility that technological changes in reproductive practices, which have made artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, and even cloning possible, may alter the discourse of gender and the discourse of motherhood in particular. While the majority of feminists today seem to dismiss Shulamith Firestone's theory that technological reproduction would be a step toward gender equality by liberating women from the burden of pregnancy and birthing, today's swift and drastic bio-technological, gynecological, and legal changes seem to have materialized Firestone's vision of non-motherhood, at least on a hypothetical level. Motherhood today is being fragmented into "biological mother," "egg donor," "surrogate mother," "contract mother," "nurturing mother," "legal mother," and so on.² Judith Roof, for example, argues in her *Reproductions of Reproduction: Imaging Symbolic Change*, that new biotechnological practices, including DNA testing, carry the possibility of subverting the metaphorical "Law-of-the-Name-of-the-Father." While Roof is mainly concerned with representations of fathers in popular culture and literature, her argument that connects changes in reproductive practices with linguistic and representational practices in the domain of the Symbolic might prove useful in understanding motherhood and maternal voices in literature.

But as Valerie Hartuouni suggests in her "Reproductive Technologies and the Negotiation of Public Meanings: The Case of Baby M," this post-modern reality of motherhood has often worked against women. It seems, as the much publicized Baby M case illustrates, when "the mother" is not a stable, unified concept but is split into fragmented entities, the power to decide which mother is most legitimate or most suitable is given to the patriarchal power structure.

Not only is the maternal voice split in many cases, but also it shows the variety of what once had been regarded as a monolithic identity. The maternal voice is overdetermined by not only the woman's relationship with the baby's father, but also by her race, ethnicity, class, and often nationality. Hartuouni demonstrates that when the court made a decision about which woman should be Baby M's mother, class elements were

obviously one of the most important determinants. The surrogate mother's working class background and her family income were the determining factors in comparison with the biological father's medical profession and upper-middle-class income. As Elizabeth Tobin points out in "Imagining Mother's Text: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Contemporary Law," how motherhood is defined and prescribed differs in legal practice according to women's race, class, and ethnicity.

III ETHNICITY AND MATERNAL DISCOURSES

What do we find in maternal discourse by women who are neither white nor middle-class? Hirsch presents Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use" as examples of maternal discourse, but she does not explore the reason why her examples are both written by African American women. It may be that, as Mary Helen Washington argues in "I Sign My Mother's Name: Alice Walker, Dorothy West, Paule Marshall," African American women have a matrilineal tradition that encourages women's creativity. But at the same time, it is possible that their experiences and sensitivity as African American women, as can be seen in Gwendolyn Brooks' works, may appropriately be represented by maternal discourse. As Sara Ruddick points out in her *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, being a mother in itself includes various activities and variations of emotions, just as postmodern experiences may be fragmented and multi-faceted. By employing maternal discourse, one may explore a variety of maternal experiences and subjectivities which are typical of mothers of racial minorities; by doing this, one may also represent a reality that is shared by the majority and may be conceived as "postmodern". Women of color in the US, when writing in maternal discourse, theorize and depict the most avant-garde situations that are becoming more common throughout the world. They do so by revising and subverting the existing discourse on motherhood: dualistic images of mothers as self-effacing, all embracing, nurturing and affectionate, and/or all-powerful, devouring, and domineering still prevail not only in anti-feminist literature and the mass media, but feminist discourse as well. Women of color use maternal discourse as an alternative grand narrative. Fragmented and de-centered but still written by a "core agency," maternal discourse may be used as a way to present an alternative to postmodern nihilism.³

In the remainder of this essay I will briefly examine three novels, Toni

Morrison's *Paradise*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. Their styles, plots, and cultural and historical backgrounds are diverse, but all of them employ maternal discourse. Here I will use the word "maternal discourse" in two ways.

Firstly, maternal discourse is a narrative about a mother written from a mother's point of view. This makes it possible to present a variety of maternal realities, including such acts as abuse and desertion, without falling back on the monolithic condemnation of less-than-ideal mothers as morally "bad" or psychologically "sick." Since maternal behaviors may be overdetermined by cultural, historical, and political specificities, along with the subject's psychological inclinations and personal traits, presenting various mothers' stories in itself may powerfully portray the fragmentation and decenteredness of today's society.

Secondly, maternal discourse refers to a narrative that unifies fragmented and de-centered small narrative parts into a larger whole. Just as maternal subjectivity is fragmented but still embodies agency, maternal discourse may be used as a narrative strategy that unifies fragmented aspects of reality into a whole picture without glossing over or suppressing them into a linear master narrative.

I will demonstrate how the three authors exploit both aspects of maternal discourse, present fragmented contemporary realities, and succeed in creating a totalizing effect. Morrison presents an alternative to a straightforwardly linear patriarchal narrative, Silko draws parallels between maternal discourse and matrilineal, matriarchal Native American traditions, and Kingston employs a narrator who, according to Chinese American cultural tradition, is both maternal and authoritative.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the story of an ex-slave woman Sethe, is considered as one of the finest examples of maternal discourse in contemporary American literature. In *Paradise* (1998), Morrison's first novel since receiving the Nobel Prize in 1993, mothers are again represented in extreme situations, but *Paradise* goes further by creating not just one maternal voice, but a plurality of maternal discourses centered on racially and economically diverse women. As the *New Yorker* reviewer Louis Menard suggests with his title "The War between Men and Women," *Paradise* seems to be structured upon the didactic dichotomy of men and women, or of patriarchy and feminism. The maternal discourses in the novel, however, challenge and deconstruct these

dichotomies and the concept of “maternal” itself. In doing so, however, they also paradoxically, suggest their potential to replace the patriarchal grand narrative as representations of an all-inclusive reality.

Beginning with the shocking sentence, “They shoot the white girl first,” the novel juxtaposes the histories of two contrasting communities, from this disastrous moment in 1976 to the year 1890. One community is the small, all-black, rural town of Ruby, Oklahoma, to which “They” in the first sentence belong (3). The other is “the Convent,” seventeen miles from Ruby. This old mansion that used to be a boarding school for Indian girls is now home to a Catholic nun called “Mother,” her maid and companion Consolata, and four other women of various ages and backgrounds. One of them is “the white girl” of the first sentence, but there is no definite information about which one of them it is. The novel traces Ruby’s history along with the Convent women’s life histories, starting from the ending when Ruby’s men, blaming the Convent women for the deterioration and corruption of their town, raid the Convent and murder all the women. Each chapter, named after a female character, presents her point of view along with third-person historical accounts of Ruby and its inhabitants. These voices present diverse maternal discourses. Since we do not know which one of the Convent women is white, we are forced to imagine two versions in each of the women’s narratives. In spite of the author’s claim that “[the women’s] race did not matter,” the ambiguity of the women’s race make us realize that the same course of events may have different meanings according to the characters’ race.⁴

Among the women, Mavis’ voice is the most ostensibly maternal. Like Sethe in *Beloved*, Mavis “kills” her children, although in her case by accident and not intentionally. She goes grocery shopping for her husband’s dinner, and while she is in the store, her baby twins suffocate to death in the locked car. Mavis feels that her husband and other children blame her for the death of the twins, and suspects that they want to kill her in revenge. Panic stricken, Mavis takes her husband’s car, drives away from her home in Maryland, and heads for California. She gets lost and asks for gasoline and directions at the Convent, where she ends up staying for years.

This maternal narrative of violence, fear, and desertion also includes Mavis’ expression of her love for the twins. She claims that the twins linger in the Convent and she secretly visits her hometown to see her other children from a distance. What is most striking, however, is the

fact that she does not express any maternal guilt. Immediately after the accident, a journalist visits Mavis for an interview. But while the journalist tries to extract a stereotypical motherly narrative from Mavis, which may erase her and her family's individuality and categorize her as a mother blaming herself for her children's death, Mavis fails to provide it. For example, when the journalist says "This must be terrible for you," Mavis responds, "Yes, m'am. It's terrible for all of us" (21). Interpreting the journalist's "you" as plural, she refuses the notion that a mother feels differently from the other members of the family about the loss of two children. When the journalist pushes further—"Is there something you want other mothers to know... Something to warn them, caution them about negligence. . . So some good can come out of this awful tragedy?"—Mavis repeatedly answers that she doesn't "have nothing to say to strangers" (22). As Barbara Johnson argues in "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," "*any* death of a child is perceived as a crime committed by the mother, something a mother ought by definition to be able to prevent" (705, emphasis original). In this context, Mavis' seeming calmness with no expression of guilt and self-reproach leave readers as uneasy as it does the reporter.

This effect of uneasiness is intensified because the accidental death of the twins reminds us of the much publicized Susan Smith case in 1994. Smith killed her two sons (though not twins), rolled the car into the lake with their corpses, and then claimed that an African American man stole her car and kidnapped the children. Smith's crime was severely criticized not only because she intentionally murdered her own children, but also because she, a Southern white woman, tried to take advantage of a racist stereotype in order to cover up her crime. The Smith case represents the image of the abnormal mother who destroys her own children, and Smith's use of the stereotypical image of African American criminal men has had the effect of emphasizing the fact that this murderous mother is a white woman. With this case in mind, the ambiguity of Mavis' racial identity makes our uneasiness even more intense. We are made to realize that it makes a significant difference if Mavis is white or black. We are forced to notice that the maternal discourse, far from being "universal" and beyond ethnicity, is in fact ethnically specific and diverse.

Although she is not a biological mother, Consolata has characteristics which may justify identifying her as the most "maternal." Except for the "Mother," she is the oldest in the Convent. She is seen as a mother fig-

ure both by the Convent women and by the women of Ruby. She makes her living by growing and selling garden products and homemade bread and pies, and even has power to heal fatal wounds and illnesses. She accepts troubled women who need a refuge without much questioning. Thus, she offers an alternative to Ruby's patriarchal order, whose symbol is the "Oven" that the original members of the town carried and reassembled but is not put to everyday use to bake bread any more. At the same time, she declares to the Convent women, "I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for" (216). Thus, she makes it clear that she is not a stereotypical, self-sacrificing nurturer nor a devouring, domineering monster, but a matriarchal, spiritual authority of the group. The women are taken by surprise with Consolata's authoritative attitude;

This sweet, unthreatening old lady who seemed to love each one of them best; who never criticized, who shared everything but needed little or no care; required no emotional investment; who listened; who locked no doors and accepted each as she was. . . this ideal parent, friend, companion in whose company they were safe from harm? This perfect landlord who charged nothing and welcomed anybody; this granny goose who could be confided in or ignored, lied to or suborned; this play mother who could be hugged or walked out on, depending on the whim of the child? (262)

Thus, Consolata's maternal declaration highlights the childish egotism of the other women who ask too much from her on the assumption that she is "maternal" in a patriarchal context.

Moreover, while she plays a maternal role in relation to the other women, Consolata does not consider herself as a mother but rather as a daughter. Her "Mother," older than Consolata and mostly bed-ridden, does no "motherly" activities such as feeding, washing, or emotional consolation, as Consolata does. While Consolata takes care of Mother, and not the other way around, she feels protected by the Mother's presence. The Mother, rather than a human character, is a symbol of matriarchal order, under which Consolata administers the other women.

The other three women at the Convent, Seneca, Gigi, and Pallas, are mostly presented as daughter figures, younger than Mavis and never having had a child of their own. Each of them has had a traumatic relationship (or rather, a non-relationship) with their mother, and their coming to the Convent is in one way or another their escape from trauma and search for a place to heal.

Seneca's mother Jean abandons her when she is five years old. Jean, a single teenager, pretends to be Seneca's sister and one day leaves her in their government housing apartment. Other women in Seneca's life do not provide her with the nurturing or affection she needs. When Seneca visits her boyfriend's mother, Mrs. Turtle, her request for bail money is denied and she is not offered food or a place to stay. Another older woman, Norma Keene Fox, takes sexual advantage of her instead of giving her affectionate care, picking her up at the airport, keeping her for five weeks, then dismissing her before her husband returns from a trip abroad.

Pallas is a teenage daughter of a wealthy lawyer and an artist mother. She finds out that her boyfriend is having an affair with her mother, and while desperately running from the scene she is gang-raped and becomes pregnant. She refuses to use her original name, Divine, given to her by her mother. By calling herself Pallas, another name for the Greek Goddess Athena, she denies her mother and declares as Apollo did on the basis of Athena's birth out of the head of Zeus, that "the active regenerating function is exclusively male," and "[t]he mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed that grows."⁵ Gigi also refuses to be called by the same name as her mother, "Grace," and while her narrative is mostly about her heterosexual relationships, it is suggested that her childhood relationship with her mother was also an unfortunate one.

In the short and supernatural epilogue, Ruby's people fail to find the women's corpses, and it is suggested that the women survived the gunshots and escaped through "a door" or "a window" into another time or space. Each of the women appears briefly to her family members. Jean, after having tried to find her daughter to no avail, comes across Seneca who, though not resentful or hostile, refuses to recognize her. The other woman, probably Gigi, also tells Jean to leave, saying, "Lady, your old man is calling you" (317). When Jean, giving up, says, "I thought you were someone I knew from Woodlawn [street]," Seneca smiles and says that "everybody makes mistakes" (317). Seneca thus understands and forgives her teenage mother's act of abandoning her, probably for a man as she does now, but chooses not to be reconciled into a mother-daughter reunion and reconstruction of their relationship. Mavis appears to her eldest daughter Sal, Pallas to her mother, and Gigi to her grandfather. Their appearances are all short and rather detached, but not bitter or resentful.

The epilogue presents the possibility of keeping affectionate feelings for one's biological kin, especially between mothers and daughters, without being entangled in an intense love-hate relationship. It shows that the dichotomy of self-effacing devotion and resentment/ hate can and should be false. The epilogue points to a matriarchal narrative that may replace a patriarchal narrative of confrontation and linear succession of authority. The matriarchal narrative of *Paradise* entertains diverse maternal discourses yet keeps diverse women together under its authority.

The most ambitious and voluminous novel that Leslie Marmon Silko has produced so far, *Almanac of the Dead*, deals with characters of various ethnic, class, and national backgrounds who live in and travel between San Diego, Tucson, Alaska, and Mexico. It can be read as a representation of postmodern fragmentation, decenteredness, and late capitalist cultural logic at its gloomiest.⁶ The whole novel is divided into six parts, each of which is divided into "books," which are then divided into smaller parts introducing and developing numerous viewpoints and subplots. In these unchronologically placed small parts, Silko sarcastically and harshly depicts the Americas, as for example in her description of the corruption and violence of law enforcement on both sides of the American-Mexican border.

Like *Paradise*, *Almanac* presents maternal discourses on two levels. First, there are stories of various mothers who are ethnically, economically, and culturally diverse and deviate from the norm of white middle-class North America. The mothers' stories represent postmodern reality in which one's identity is fragmented and decentered. At the same time, the whole novel's structure and plot both depend on aspects of Native American traditional culture that are matriarchal and matrilineal.⁷ All the subplots and characters are united together as a whole by the existence of the sacred Almanac, which is created, inherited and revised by the female characters. The structure of the novel is thus based on the matriarchal culture and mythology of Native American peoples, especially the Laguna culture which attributes creative power to mothers.

The narrative, although complicated and branching into many subplots, mainly revolves around the Native American twin sisters, Lecha and Zeta, and Lecha's secretary Seese. Lecha works as a psychic who specializes in finding missing corpses, and Zeta, together with Lecha's son Ferro, smuggles drugs and weapons across the U.S.-Mexican bor-

der. The twin sisters possess a manuscript of the sacred text called the Almanac, which they inherited from their Yaqui grandmother Yoeme.

This sacred Almanac to which the title of the novel refers is a product of a matriarchal myth. It is a book of prophecy, in which the fate of the Americas, including invasion and destruction by Europeans and their eventual disappearance, are all predicted. Although fragmented and scattered because of the hardships of the tribal people, and written in a tribal language that no one really understands, the Almanac is inherited by Yoeme, who copies the original into a notebook. She then passes it on to her twin granddaughters, Lecha and Zeta. Lecha employs a white woman Seese to type the manuscript using a word processor. As the fragmented manuscript is transcribed in English by Yoeme in a notebook, and is then recorded by a word processor, the Almanac constantly changes not only its forms but also its contents. The keepers add new pieces and revise the existing ones. This history of possession and revision makes the Almanac a matrilineal text, one which is inherited by Yoeme, Zeta and Lecha, and then Seese.

Yoeme and her twin granddaughters are obviously modeled after the Laguna mythological Goddess Ts'its' tsi'nako, the Thought Woman who creates the World, and her twin daughters, Uretsete and Naotsete.⁸ This reference to Laguna mythology, along with the emphasis on the importance of the land and the Earth, gives the novel a mythical structure, as well as a matriarchal world view, in which the Mother God creates the world. We should note that this view should not be confused with versions of biological essentialism that identify women with nature. In her *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Tradition*, Paula Gunn Allen explains that "Thought Woman, with power of intelligence, creates thoughts before she creates the world, is central to the Laguna Pueblo mythology" (13). According to Allen, in this cultural context motherhood means power, and the word "mothers" does not "imply slaves, drudges, drones who are required to live only for others rather than for themselves as it does so tragically for many modern women" (27). Another important female character, Angelita, a Mexican revolutionary, also fits this tradition of matriarchal power that creates thoughts to create a world. While Angelita learns European theories such as Marxism, she refuses to obey the Cuban leftist political leadership. Instead, she persuades her people with the power of her intelligence and eloquence and creates a political movement to return the land to indigenous peoples.

On the other hand, fragments of the narrative deconstruct the stereotypical image of motherhood. None of the mothers in the novel fits the white, middle-class norm of the mother as a devoted, self-sacrificing nurturer. According to the norm, all of them have dysfunctional relationships with their children.

Yoeme, the keeper of the Almanac, marries a white man so that he will make other white people keep a political agreement with her people. When she sees that he fails to stand up against other white men and abuses Indian workers, Yoeme leaves her husband and her “children from such a man” (116). Yoeme says that her children are all too weak, but she likes Zeta and Lecha and appoints them as the inheritors of the Almanac. Lecha’s relationship with her son, Ferro, is also unusual. Lecha leaves her newborn son in her twin sister’s care, “traveling, from lover to lover and city to city” (125). When Lecha comes back briefly after a year, she casually asks, “Oh, the baby! . . . Where is he? What do you call him?” without showing any sign of regret or guilt (125). Seese is the only woman who expresses maternal love for her son, but she is also far from the image of an ideal mother; she is a drug addict when she is pregnant, and when the baby is kidnapped, she is too intoxicated to protect him.

Lear Blue, the wife of Mafia gangster Max Blue, is another mother figure who deviates from the norm. She has two sons, but she devotes her attention, time, and energy to a real-estate development project called Venice, Arizona. Her scheme of creating a community full of water and green plants in the middle of the desert can be seen as a grotesque parody of ideal maternal nurturing.⁹ Aiming to produce an upper-class neighborhood decorated by green lawns, gardens, and water fountains in the desert, her plan requires a huge amount of water to be sucked from the deep underground that will inevitably lead to destruction of the natural environment.

These mothers’ stories may be interpreted as signs of the chaotic decomposition of the ideals and structures of family and society. The narrative does not present these behaviors of the mothers as heroic, courageous, or acceptable. Yoeme’s children and Ferro all resent their mothers’ abandonment of them. Yoeme’s children refuse to let her in their houses, and Ferro refuses to be reconciled with Lecha.

However, Yoeme watches her children and grandchildren, and chooses the twin sisters as her heirs, and Lecha, by hiring Seese as a secretary, chooses her as the inheritor of the Almanac. These acts support

a view of the mother as a creator and inheritor of cultural myths and a decision maker, a matriarch who has power and ability to choose her heir regardless of her biological connections, not someone who is a domestic caretaker devoted to her children.

The reality that Silko depicts in *Almanac*—the Americas controlled by greed, racism, and sexism, by the most blunt and cruel forms of capitalism, by upper class white males—is close to what may be called postmodern nihilism. The world has no center, reality is fragmented, and there is no stable subjectivity except as a consumer. However, the main characters do not fall into nihilism because of the *Almanac* and its prophecy that indigenous peoples will regain the American lands. As in Morrison's *Paradise*, the viewpoints of the unusual mothers and the novel's matrilineal text represent and organize chaotic and fragmented realities into a positive vision for the future.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book*, set in 1960s San Francisco, represents postmodern realities at their most hilariously playful. The protagonist, Wittman Ah Sing, is a fifth generation Chinese-American. He is a Berkeley graduate, would-be poet and dramatist, and unemployed pacifistic draft dodger. Besides his namesake Walt Whitman, he identifies himself with Malte Laurids Brigge and with Monkey, the trickster hero of the Chinese Classic *Monkey*. He plans and produces a play that is based on *Monkey, The Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, and *The Outlaws of the Marsh*, which eventually ends up involving people of various ethnic, class, and national backgrounds. Diversity within the Chinese American community in California as well as outside of it is emphasized. Wittman's mother is a former vaudeville star dancer, Ruby Long Legs, and his father, a former vaudeville MC, Zeppelin Ah Sing, now publishes a magazine called *Find Treasure*, to which six people subscribe. His grandmother, Popo, may or may not be his real grandmother; there is even a possibility that Popo is not Chinese, but Japanese. In fact, when Wittman's parents become tired of taking care of Popo, they take her to Reno and leave her in the mountains.

Wittman is irritated by the unsophisticated manners and shabby clothes of recent immigrants, and is angered by the racism of American society that automatically categorizes him as "Chinese" and "not American." He quotes freely from American popular culture and American and European literary works as well as Chinese classics.

As in *Paradise* and *Almanac*, mothers deviate substantially from the

American white middle-class norm. Wittman's mother, Ruby Long Legs, conspires with her husband to abandon Popo in the mountain. She plays mahjong with the former Flora-Dora girls, with whom she worked on stage, neither cooks nor serves food to Wittman when he visits her with his bride, Tana, and does not even notice when Wittman shaved his beard off (195). Popo, his alleged grandmother, likes gambling as well, and after she is abandoned in the mountains by Wittman's parents, she meets an old Chinese-American businessman who proposes and marries her immediately. She refuses to introduce her family to her husband because she is afraid that they will ask her rich husband for money (266, 67). Moreover, when Wittman tells her about his stage project, she tells him that she wants to play "the princess with eighty-seven attendant faeries" (267).

But while Kingston challenges the white middle-class norm of motherhood by presenting these hilariously unusual mothers, she makes use of the maternal voice to organize the chaotic reality that Wittman confronts and creates. It is important that Kingston chooses two texts to round out the multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-cultural playful chaos. One is *Monkey*, the dominant text of the three classics on which Wittman's play is based. It is a story of a sub-and superhuman trickster, Monkey King who, along with the Pig and the Sandman, accompanies the Buddhist monk Tripikata to India to acquire a sacred text. While he is basically virtuous and devoted to Tripikata, Monkey King is often mischievous, arrogant, and disrespectful, and has to be punished by Tripitaka and by Kuan Yin, who watches over them throughout the trip. As Kingston mentions in her interview with Marilyn Chin, the omniscient narrator in her novel is Kuan Yin, the guardian goddess of the Monkey in the original (Chin, 89). Kuan Yin, as the Goddess of Mercy, is supposed to be androgynous, but in Chinese and other East Asian countries, she is usually imagined as feminine and is often seen as maternal because of her compassion for and nurturing of human beings.¹⁰ The narrator addresses Wittman as a mother addresses a child: her voice is educational, instructional, and sometimes scolding, but never severely judgmental or condemning. It is often chiding when Wittman, because of his false self-confidence and male-centeredness, makes a foolish or condescending comment. For example, when Wittman talks to his former classmate, Nanci Lee, the narrator makes a critical comment, "You are . . . not the only one to talk. She had to talk too, make this a conversation" (17). And when Wittman becomes a pacifist, she makes a playful but encouraging comment, "Dear American Monkey, don't be afraid.

Here, let us tweak your ear, and kiss your other ear” (340).

Another important reference is Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurid Brigge*, from which Wittman often quotes. *The Notebooks* begins with Malte’s fascinated gaze upon a pregnant woman visiting a “maison d’ac-couchement” to deliver a baby, and ends with a version of a parable of the Prodigal Son, who is not yet reconciled with the Father. Throughout the novel, the young poet’s oscillation between the maternal and the paternal is highlighted. As Michael F. Davis demonstrates in “Writing the Mother in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*: The Rhetoric of Abjection,” *The Notebooks* records many moments of Malte’s willing surrender to the maternal narrative, which is defined as fragmented, non-linear, and de-centered. When Wittman reads from *The Notebooks* to his fellow passengers in a bus, he chooses the part in which Christine Brahe’s ghost enters the family dining room and Malte’s father is infuriated by this intrusion. It is significant that Wittman chooses one of the most memorable parts of *The Notebooks*, in which the patriarchal order of the dinner table is subverted by the maternal, and evaluates it as “the good part” (9). Just as Malte is transformed into a girl, “Sophie,” when he surrenders to the maternal narrative (*The Notebooks*, 99), Wittman is called “my honey girl” by Popo (263). Wittman’s identification with Malte suggests that while Wittman presents himself rather as a “macho spirit” of the pre-feminist era, he is drawn into the fragmented and non-linear maternal narrative that deviates from the patriarchal order (Chin, 89).

The maternal discourse of Kuan Yin, combined with rejection of the patriarchal order as is expressed in *The Notebooks*, results in the final unification of the novel: Wittman’s conclusive speech at the end of his play and his determination to become a pacifist at the end of the novel. *Tripmaster Monkey*’s maternal discourses parallel the fragmented and diverse postmodern reality they describe, and present a unifying structure for it.

IV CONCLUSION

As Sojourner Truth powerfully claimed in 1845 in Akron, Ohio at a suffragist convention, her motherhood was the same and not the same as white women’s. By eloquently stating her experiences as a slave woman and mother, whose hard labor had been exploited and whose children had been sold away from her, she demonstrated that the categories “woman” and “mother” are not in any way monolithic or biologically determined, but have the possibility of politically uniting women who

each have diverse experiences both as a woman and as a mother. Truth's rhetorical question, "Ain't I A Woman?," does not suppress but highlights differences between black and white mothers in the United States under slavery, but at the same time it has the power to unite women of both races and to bring forth political change. Similarly, postmodernism represented through maternal voices does not necessarily become as apolitical or nihilistic as some critics such as Terry Eagleton may claim.¹¹ A certain text being "postmodern" does not necessarily mean that it is liberatory, nor does it mean that it is inevitably conservative or nihilistic. Such texts, at their most insightful, may represent the world and people's subjectivity as fragmented, decentered, and saturated in post-industrial consumer capitalism, not in order to reflect it passively but to organize it in a politically meaningful way. Critics such as hooks who view postmodern culture positively see it as a space where old ties are severed and which provides possibilities for new forms of bonding and oppositional practices (hooks 31). Their faith is borne out in the kind of maternal discourses written by Morrison, Silko, and Kingston that I have just briefly analyzed. Their novels not only offer new insights into feminist theories on maternal subjectivity, and make use of maternal discourse in order to illuminate postmodern reality, but also offer a radical alternative vision of our present reality and our future as well.

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NOTES

¹ See, for example, Margaret Homans' "'Women of Color' Writers and Feminist Theory"

² It is ironic that reproductive technologies, which are at least partially responsible for this fragmentation of motherhood, have developed in order to benefit those who want a child "of their own" rather than adopting a biological stranger. Here, as Eriko Nagata points out in *Dotokuha Feministo Sengen*, biological essentialism and fragmentation of "motherhood" have a complicated relationship (238–256).

³ For a critique of postmodernist dismissal of subjectivity and the alternative concept of the core self, which is different from the "unified self," see Jane Flax's *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, & Post-Modernism in the Contemporary West*, especially p. 210.

⁴ Paul Gray, "Paradise Found," *Time*, Jan. 1996, 62–68. About the ambiguity of the characters' race that makes different readings possible, see Elizabeth Abel's "Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation," which offers a close reading of Morrison's short story "Recitatif."

⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, 134.

⁶ About this concept of late capitalist logic, see Phillip Brian Harper's *Framing the Margins* (10).

⁷ In this essay's context, it does not matter whether Native American tribes were "actually" matriarchal or matrilineal, and if so, to what extent. What is important is that the belief exists and that Silko, along with some other Native American writers, chooses it as part of their tradition which should be revived and passed on.

⁸ About the Laguna myth of Thought Woman and her twin daughters, see *The Sacred Hoop*, p.13–21. Silko's first novel, *Ceremony*, also refers to these mythological figures.

⁹ For a Western version of this "Mother Earth" image, see Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*.

¹⁰ Kingston perceives Kuan Yin as female, as her use of the word "Goddess" clearly indicates (Marilyn Chin, 89).

¹¹ Marilyn Edelstein reviews critiques of postmodernism in her "Resisting Postmodernism; or, 'A Postmodernism of Resistance': bell hooks and the Theory Debates."