

Maternal Discourses in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*

Even in the early twenty-first century, despite great strides in various feminist and womanist movements, the most socially acceptable roles for women in western cultures—namely daughter, wife, and especially mother—are roles that often posit women as at once central and marginal. These roles can simultaneously recognize *and* erase the importance of women. Such ambivalence about motherhood forms a primary subject of Nalo Hopkinson's speculative novel *Midnight Robber* (2000). Most critical treatments of this text explore its innovative use of creole language and African diasporic folk traditions, but this article interrogates the author's fraught representations of motherhood and family. Hopkinson identifies science fiction as "a subversive literature" (Rutledge 591), claiming that what she likes about the genre is its ability to "point out systemic flaws in our social systems" (Soyka, "Interview" 4). In the interview in which she expressed this view, Hopkinson referred specifically to the sometimes violent social dynamics between men and women; however, the statement easily applies to contemporary conceptions of motherhood and the confinement that maternal roles can entail. Hopkinson searches for other patterns of motherhood, for different dynamics and multifaceted relationships to motherhood. In a separate context, critic Isabel Hoving cites examples of "anxious, ambivalent, often subverting homemaking" in her analysis of Caribbean migrant women's writing, and postulates that the Home must be reappropriated to account for the concept of "bound motion" (15). Similarly, one can read in Hopkinson's novel an attempt to subvert and worry the concepts of both maternity and female freedom.

Heather Shaw has focused on the aura of ambivalence in the novel, but in terms of filial relations rather than constructions of motherhood:

There is a kind of duality in these relationships that [Hopkinson] examines close up; we see, in her work, how the power that parents have over their children can be both extremely comforting and undeniably terrifying. Her books feature protagonists who are initially young and helpless; through the tough realities of their interactions with their parents, they begin to learn the more about themselves. . . . (1)

Moving beyond Shaw's analysis, I find that the specific implications of race, cultural identity, and history must be taken into account for the reader's appropriate understanding of the family ties and gender roles portrayed in *Midnight Robber*. Throughout the Americas, women of the African diaspora must negotiate the conventional roles of daughter, wife, and mother in complex ways because they are the products of individual and historical migration patterns—both voluntary and forced—and the atroci-

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ties of slavery. In addition, women of Caribbean descent are also the products of the colonial system and the ensuing anti-colonial intellectual and political movements. Colonial legacy compels many of these authors not only to challenge the notions of motherhood dictated by slavery, but also to write against notions of motherhood perpetuated by the imperial "mother country" discourse and the ensuing utopian motherland ideology (be it of the island nations or the continent of Africa) that are proposed by members of various independence and nationalist movements.¹

Born in Jamaica and traveling between Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad, and the United States before she immigrated to Canada at the age of 16, Hopkinson herself embodies an African diasporic experience: she identifies as being "predominantly of African ancestry, with chunks of Scottish, Jewish, English, Arawak, and continental Indian in the mix" (Mohanraj 2). Not surprisingly, one theme she develops throughout *Midnight Robber* is exile. "It's a big theme when you come from a diasporic culture. Where is home? Can you go back there? Or do you have to go forward and make yourself a home elsewhere? Does home reside within you or outside of you?" (Soyka, "Literature" 1). Implicit in Hopkinson's questions, I would argue, is another: is it appropriate to identify one's birthland as "motherland," thereby asserting an irrevocable connection between the subject and the biological mother? The author's emphasis on the positive influence of "other-mothers" in the novel would suggest a resounding "no."

The intersection of geography and gender ideology becomes apparent in the language that Hopkinson uses to describe the colonization of Toussaint, the fictional "home" planet in *Midnight Robber*. The Marryshow Corporation plants Earth Engine Number 127 on the planet to generate life, "like God entering he woman; plunging into the

womb of soil to impregnate the planet with the seed of Granny Nanny" (2). The land is construed as a woman's body, and one is reminded of the initial gendering of the so-called "New" World territories that stretched before the European imperial gaze starting in the late fifteenth century: although explorers' discourses feminized landscapes and visualized them specifically in terms of heterosexual fertility, their feminine and maternal metaphors lacked any accompanying associations of authority and nurturance. In these imperial narratives, the unpolluted land corresponded to the virginal woman, available to be taken and used by the first imperial power who "planted" her. As Annette Kolodny theorizes about early US literature in *The Lay of the Land* (1984), to cast land as woman was symbolically to civilize it, tame it, and thus control it during exploration and colonization, eradicating the threatening and possibly emasculating terror of the unknown wilderness.²

Hopkinson further hones the connection between traditional political colonizing powers and gender oppression when the protagonist Tan-Tan tries to explain her pregnancy: "[My father Antonio] rape me. . . . He put this baby in me. . . . He was forever trying to plant me, like I was his soil to harvest" (260). The author clearly uses Antonio Habib to critique conventional abuses of power and the ideology that Might Makes Right. The character represents a potent example of the pathology of power; his "penchant for abuse" is alluded to but kept under control on Toussaint by the artificial intelligence called Granny Nanny. Once he is exiled, however, he quickly asserts his sense of dominion by taking advantage of the small and weak—in this case, his daughter Tan-Tan. As Hopkinson explained in an interview: "he never quite recovers from the loss of access and power and he's now [on New Half-Way Tree] in a place where it's easier for him to give himself some sense of mastery by abusing others" (Soyka, "Interview" 5). Thus,

Hopkinson links the political to the personal; Antonio's abuse of mayoral power in one community translates to the sexual abuse of his daughter in another.

It might be argued that *Midnight Robber* shifts the sociopolitical gender dynamic in the case of Toussaint's colonization since the "seed" that is sown is not male sperm, but rather the life-giving force of a female entity—the artificial intelligence Granny Nanny. Hopkinson writes: "The tools, the machines, the buildings; even the earth itself on Toussaint and all the Nation Worlds had been seeded with nanomites—Granny Nanny's hands and her body" (10). Granny Nanny's name invokes that of Nanny of the Maroons, a historical resistance leader of pre-Emancipation Jamaica whose name and story often take on mythic proportions. Nanny strategized and fought in the First Maroon War against the British (1720-39), but as poet Lorna Goodison imagines, Nanny is not only a warrior, but also a mother of the Jamaican people: ". . . my whole body would quicken / at the birth of every one of my people's children" ("Nanny" ll. 8-9). Nanny's figurative motherhood is similarly eulogized in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* (1984), which details the legend of the two sisters from whom all Jamaicans mythically descend: Nanny, who fled slavery and became the emblem of resistance, and Sekusu, who, because she remained a slave, came to represent victimhood, complacency, and complicity.³

Among the characters in *Midnight Robber*, Granny Nanny is associated with freedom and leadership, deepening the positive connections between Hopkinson's fictional figure and the historical Nanny. During Jonkanoo, an African-Caribbean festival celebrated near Christmas Day, the people of the planet Toussaint give thanks to Granny Nanny "for the Leaving Times, for her care, for life in this land, free from downpression and botheration" (18). She is later revealed as an unflagging protector of her charges; the narrator

informs readers: "When Granny Nanny realise how Antonio kidnap Tan-Tan, she hunt he through the dimension veils" (327). Refusing to let her "child" go, and proving herself to be a more apt guardian than the child's biological parent who puts her in mortal danger, Granny doggedly protects the young girl.⁴ Furthermore, the plot reveals that shortly after birth, all citizens of Toussaint have an earbug implanted in their heads to connect each of them to Granny's "web"; this earbug can be tuned into and brought into fore-consciousness by tapping the temple, but an individual can never be taken offline completely. There is no "privacy" per se, but more importantly, no individual risks a potentially destructive isolation. Nanny's presence protects the safety of All instead of the privacy rights of One: "no-one could override Nanny's privacy protection. Nanny only chose to reveal information that she judged would infringe on public safety" (50).⁵ That the system allows human independence is referenced early in the narrative: "It had been designed to be flexible, to tolerate a variety of human expression, even dissension, so long as it didn't upset the balance of the whole" (10).⁶

The connections between freedom, leadership, protection, and Nanny as mother-of-the-people might seem to strengthen the notion that maternity is privileged in Hopkinson's novel as well as elsewhere in society. The author, however, very aware of the relations between power and her own experience as a person of color from a formerly colonized region, complicates easy associations when she wonders: "What does a fiction about mastery of self and other through technology become in the hands of writers who have cause to be wary of that mastery? What does a fiction which talks about colonizing other races and spaces become when written by people who've recently—as the history of the world goes—experienced that colonization?" (Soyka, "Literature" 2-3) In Hopkinson's hands, Granny Nanny is

in many ways a benevolent presence—specifically a protective one: “[The Web] kept the Nation Worlds protected, guided and guarded its people” (10). This positive reading must be tempered, however, by considerations of the legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean. Martinican theorist Frantz Fanon recognized the incongruity between the benevolent Mother—the figure openly perpetuated in colonial society and prevalent in the conscious minds of colonialism’s participants—and the negatively charged Mother Country, the harsh figure associated with the oppression of the colonized. He argued:

On the unconscious plane, colonialism . . . did not seek to be considered by the native as a gentle, loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather as a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from . . . giving free rein to its evil instincts. The colonial mother protects her child from itself, from its ego, and from its physiology, its biology and its own unhappiness which is its very essence. (211)⁷

Hopkinson herself remarks about Granny Nanny: “Rather than being a ‘Big Brother’ paradigm it’s an affectionate . . . sense of love, care and duty” (Aylott 2). She refers to the artificial intelligence’s presence specifically in terms of protective motherhood, but she also reveals ambivalence about the role: “It really does feel like being mothered, and sometimes that’s a good thing, sometimes a smothering thing” (Aylott 2). Exactly where is the boundary between safekeeping and stifling? A crack in a clearly defined maternal perfection appears.

Ambivalently, then, Hopkinson opens the dialogue for a rethinking of maternity that complicates patriarchal, masculinist ideologies; eurocentric visions of feminism that discount cultural and historical codes; and second-wave feminist critiques that view

maternity as a hindrance to woman’s full potential. The s/mothering Nanny possesses the power of influence through nurturing but also *political* power; she can be centered and grounded and yet mobile and active; she can stifle and yet she can also free.

I want to note that Hopkinson

Hopkinson undoes the conventional idealization of biological motherhood to argue for the privilege of chosen families.

names Nanny as a *grandmother* figure. She serves as the source of new life on Toussaint, but she differs from the *direct* source of life a birth mother would be. *Midnight Robber*

connects, then, to other late 20th-century African American literature in which broken ties between mothers and daughters predominate.

Describing patterns in this body of writing, Marianne Hirsch details women authors’ tendency to write from the perspective of daughters far more often than from that of mothers. The black women “daughter-writers” to whom she refers define themselves “in opposition to and not in imitation of the maternal figure” (178).⁸

Hopkinson’s novel appears to fit the bill in these more literal ways as well. It centers on the experiences of Tan-Tan, the protagonist whose emotional relationship with her biological mother is extremely fraught. The girl is also physically separated from her mother when she is essentially kidnapped by her father as he escapes prosecution for murder and flees to New Half-Way Tree, the planet of lost people—drifters, convicts, “the ragamuffins-them” (2).⁹ Tan-Tan then experiences alienation from Janisette, a stepmother who first refuses to protect the child from the sexual advances of her father, then blames her for them. While Tan-Tan’s negative experiences with these maternal figures dominate the narrative, one cannot ignore the protagonist’s positive relationships with other-mothers, nor her painful decision to become a mother, thus bringing a child of incestuous rape into

the world. This plotline illustrates the intersecting systems of gender *and* racial oppression that confine women and keep them locked into competition with each other rather than nurturing each other. There seems no escape out of the dangerous binaries: good mother or bad mother, mother or non-mother, virgin or whore, passively dutiful daughter or antagonistic rebel.

Hopkinson identifies three core folk stories in the construction of *Midnight Robber*: the African trickster tale of Anancy the Spider and Dry Bone, the Taino ecological myth of the squalid planet, and the Jamaican legend of Three-[F]ingered Jack, a historical figure who killed his plantation owner for a crime committed against his mother and then became the subject of fear rather than celebration amongst the people of the island. Hopkinson claims that the third tale is the one that initiated her thinking about the novel: "Think about this man who is being hunted down by his own people, because they hired freed Africans as [bounty] hunters. He has killed the plantation owner as revenge for something the man did to his mother, but they turn him into this boogie man" (MIT Bear-Benford 13). The son's attempt to vindicate his mother unsuccessfully reverses the traditional model of protective parent and dependent child—a paradigm thwarted by slavery. Furthermore, the son is not deemed heroic for his attempt. As a woman of African descent, his mother is not valued enough in their dystopic society that his act, to say nothing of her life and safety, be cherished; no one ponders the *reason* for the son's violence. The people who fear this "boogie man" running loose on the island—both white *and* black—identify with the murdered plantation owner (implicitly a slave owner) more than with the avenging son or the victimized mother.

The absence of the maternal perspective in a plethora of contemporary African diasporic narratives may be symbolically wrapped up in stereotypes of African women generated during slavery; enslaved mothers were often portrayed by the dominant colonial class as emotionally distant from their children. They were seen as beset by unconcerned, apathetic, and even capricious. These representations left them symbolically exposed to shame in the open field of mainstream history and conventional constructions of "the good mother"—"properly married, faithful, subservient, modest, . . . put[ting] aside her own desires to rear and inspire her children" (Thurer 141)—a construct that has often served to devalue other women—"bad" mothers, or worse yet, "bad" non-mothering women.

In *Midnight Robber*, Tan-Tan's mother, Ione Brasil, fits the stereotypical model. She completely subverts the conventional, "naturally" nurturing, mother figure—a potentially powerful move. Rather than opening up the category, however, to allow for varying possibilities of womanhood, her characterization reinforces racist stereotypes of motherhood for Africans in the Americas. Ione is identified as the mayor's "hot-blooded, lonely wife" (48), replicating the image of the oversexed jezebel. She does not pursue pregnancy to raise children, but rather to calm "some of her restlessness" (6) and to remedy her souring marriage: a baby is "a new way to catch Antonio's attention again" (46). Tan-Tan comes into the world as an objectified pawn—"one more *thing* to quarrel over" (46, *italics added*)—rather than a living being to be loved and cherished:

[F]rom [when] the first birth pangs hit Ione, it was as though she realised she didn't have the taste for hard labour, oui. As soon as she pushed the baby out of her, Ione took one look at it and shouted at Antonio to activate the wet-nurse, purchased to help Ione with the breastfeeding. The midwife Babsie took the baby, held it out for Ione to

give it one dry kiss on the tiny cheek,
and that was that for mother-love. (46)

Hopkinson rejects the convention that to birth a child is automatically to love the child; perhaps she attempts to reformulate gender roles beyond the notion of mother as naturally emotional nurturer, father as material provider. Antonio's behavior stands in stark contrast to his wife's, as "[w]ith trembling hands, he made sure his new daughter was snug and comfortable in the carry pouch" (47). He quiets her crying, guides her mouth to the artificial wet-nurse's breast, and sits for two hours at the infant's side. "He marvelled to watch the new little thing eat, sleep. Watched her wake crying at the feel of the soiled bedding wadded round her. The wet-nurse had come with instructions. . . . [He] followed them meticulously, afraid at every turn that he would hurt the child" (47). While the reformulation of male roles is successful at this point, the attempted revision of female gender stereotypes is ultimately unsuccessful because Ione's selfish behavior in no way begs imitation.¹⁰

When Antonio takes the baby back into the birthing room, Ione gives him a withering look—presumably for leaving her alone after the labor while he cared for the newborn; her scorn further accentuates her self-centered nature and renders alien the sacrificial tendencies traditionally associated with motherhood.

She reached out her two arms to claim her property. Antonio put the baby into them. But Ione grasped too roughly. The pickney woke up and started to cry.

"No," Antonio said. "Hold she so."

"Back off from me. You make any pickney?" (47)

Besides demonstrating her arrogance, this scene is one of many in which Ione is too rough with Tan-Tan; she is constantly patting her on the shoulder "just a little bit too hard" (48), startling her awake, or hugging her "a little too hard" (55). Hopkinson's diction in the first passage significantly complicates

the reader's understanding of Ione as a mere stereotype. By considering the child as "her property," Ione stands closer to the slave master than to the slave herself; she views Tan-Tan more as an object that belongs to her than as a human being. When the protagonist grows into a young child, Ione's attempts "to be nice" to her daughter consist of shallow and materialistic displays of love rather than physical affection or quality time: "She was forever buying her new toys, even though she wouldn't play Robber Queen . . . for she didn't like to 'bother up sheself with stupidity'" (33). For 200 years, the people of Toussaint have been physically separated from Earth and the social, political, and economic aftermath of slavery; however, psychologically, it still seems very much with them. In other words, these scenes function less as an extension of the idea of the "naturally" apathetic Black mother, and more as a comment on the ways that the devaluation of Black lives has penetrated our collective consciousness.

Two of the more obvious social flaws that Hopkinson addresses in the novel are the sexual double standard held toward males and females in western societies, and the valuing of the biological mother over and above any other type of nurturing adult who loves and positively influences a child. Regarding the former, although both Antonio and Ione have extramarital affairs, calypsos about only Ione's, and not also Antonio's, sexual appetites are sung about the town—"This woman greedy for so, you see?" (38). People exclaim: "A man have him pride, you know! How you could expect him to live with a woman who horning he steady?" (32) But Ione they expect to tolerate Antonio's philandering. The protagonist's mother explains to her: "Tan-Tan, you daddy vex with me; he vex bad. He forget all the nights I spend alone, all the other women I catch he with" (25).

Antonio is not completely faultless in the eyes of the people; they declare

that his "heart must be hard" (22) for abandoning his daughter. But they do not condemn the way he has mistreated his wife. Hopkinson develops characters so taken with the rarity of a compassionate father, one attentive to the emotional as well as financial needs of his child, that they cannot see the danger signs of his evolving sexual interest in her. The narrator subtly reports that "Mayor Antonio was always bringing sweetie and dolly for his little girl Tan-Tan, but he never had anything sweet no more for his hot-blooded, lonely wife" (48). This substitution is noteworthy, especially after the occasion in which, livid with jealousy after hearing rumors about Ione's affair, Antonio arrives home and, looking at his daughter, "felt liquid with love all over again for his *doux-doux* darling girl, his one pureness. Just so Ione had been as a young thing" (13). Both passages reveal that the mayor symbolically, mentally replaces his wife with his daughter. Unable to distinguish between the two primary women in his life, the loving father eventually degenerates into a sexual predator.¹¹

Regarding idealized motherhood, Hopkinson undoes the conventional privileging of biological motherhood over and above other familial relationships. Tan-Tan receives much more of her formative, sustaining care from those not genetically related to her than she gets from her birth parents. Granny Nanny and Eshu the house computer, the robotic minder, Nursie, and the birdlike creature Benta all prove better equipped to mother Tan-Tan than Ione. Strikingly, this list of physically, emotionally, and psychologically nurturing mothers includes mostly non-human beings, some of whom are simply sentient and not truly "alive."

From infancy, Tan-Tan has a "minder" — a robot that appears more anxious about her well being than does her mother. While Tan-Tan climbs the tree in the front yard, the minder scurries about, "chicle body vibrating for anxious; its topmost green crystal eyes

tracking, tracking, as it tried to make sure Tan-Tan was all right" (13). The narrative later notes that Tan-Tan is "used to staying out of Ione's way, and playing Robber Queen and jacks with just the fretful minder for company. She liked leaning against the minder's yielding chicle, humming along with the nursery rhymes it would sing to her" (17).

Even more of a mother figure (but *not* because she is human) is Nursie, the woman who takes care of Tan-Tan's daily needs, including dressing her, fixing her hair, oiling her skin, and bestowing affection. Nursie calls the protagonist "*My pretty little girl!*" (54, italics added), effectively supplanting Ione as mother. After the Jonkanoo holiday festivities, when Ione cannot console her daughter, she irritably orders: "Take she, Nursie. . . I can't talk no sense into she at all" (25). Nursie calls Tan-Tan "darling," holds her, and asks what is wrong, while Ione simply demands that the child stop her crying; she admits, "I ain't know what to do for she when she get like this." Nursie and Ione both take Tan-Tan in to bed,

but is Nursie who washed Tan-Tan's face and plaited up her hair nice again so it wouldn't knot up while she slept. Is Nursie who dressed Tan-Tan in her favourite yellow nightie with the lace at the neck. Nursie held to her lips the cup of hot cocoa-tea that Cookie sent from the kitchen, and coaxed her to drink it. . . Nursie put Tan-Tan to bed with the covers pulled right up to her neck, and stroked her head while sleep came. Ione only paced back and forth the whole time, watching at the two of them. (25-26)

Nursie is more compassionate, more understanding of Tan-Tan's feelings, more familiar with her likes and dislikes and daily routine, more comfortable displaying physical and emotional affection. In giving her the chocolate milk drink, Nursie also represents more of the physical maternal nurturer. Ione stands distinctly outside the circle of intimacy, a passive observer of the child's upbringing. As Tan-Tan falls asleep she hears "Ione's sweet voice . . .

singing a lullaby to her from across the room" (26), but again, Hopkinson emphasizes the physical distance between them. When Antonio takes the protagonist to New Half-Way Tree, Tan-Tan confesses to "missing Nursie and eshu just as much as Ione" (108).

Notably, one of the primary reasons for Nursie's presence in the house is her financial need: she was taken into Antonio's household when she had nowhere else to go. Although her emotional connection to Tan-Tan reads as completely genuine, she does not simply serve as a mammy figure in the novel—another popular stereotype of the woman of African descent, related to the apathetic mother in that the mammy is happy to serve the (typically white) master and loves the master's family much more than her own. Hopkinson complicates the picture to reveal structures of power that are not exclusively race-bound: Nursie's "master" is the exploitative Antonio, not a white man, and it is Antonio who is complicit in Nursie's being left alone and unable to support herself when her daughter is exiled to New Half-Way Tree. Nursie refuses to talk about her, although her facial expression of "old sorrow and frustration" (19) reveals the emotional attachment and pain she still feels over the loss of her child.

Finally, Benta, one of the *hinte*, or female members of the *douen* species on New Half-Way Tree, provides Tan-Tan with the affection and guidance she requires after fleeing the final tragic scene with Antonio. Unlike Nursie, who might be seen as mothering Tan-Tan in the place of her own exiled daughter, Benta mothers Tan-Tan alongside her own children. Even before the protagonist recognizes her as a sentient being, the *hinte* "butted her head gently against Tan-Tan's shoulder in her customary greeting. She nuzzled against Tan-Tan's neck and combed the girl's untidy plaits through her beak. . . . Benta bird was forever trying to groom her hair" (170), much the way Nursie did back on Toussaint. At one point, Benta and her

partner Chichibud instruct their charge to descend from their tree-home only during the day, essentially putting her on curfew. "And all Tan-Tan protested, she had to obey" (264). They represent effective parents, and treat Tan-Tan no differently from their own children when it comes to keeping her from danger. When the *douen* Kret attacks Tan-Tan with his knife, "Something big and warm covered her, gently. Benta had shoved Tan-Tan down and was shielding her beneath her huge, warm body" (181). At another point, when Janisette's car lunges through the brush, Benta covers Tan-Tan first; significantly, her biological children scramble in afterward, to "hide under her *too*" (265, italics added). The physical protection that Benta provides transcends that which biological mother Ione and stepmother Janisette cannot provide during Tan-Tan's childhood, and it even surpasses Granny Nanny's attempts to protect Tan-Tan across the dimensional veil.¹²

Benta and Chichibud's daughter Abitefa befriends Tan-Tan, and their close relationship resembles that between sisters as they fight, injure each other, and then make up: "Slowly Abitefa reached towards her, put gentle hands on the back of her head" (226). When the two are exiled from Abitefa's original *douen* community, the young *hinte* refuses to join any other unless Tan-Tan accompanies her. Similarly, Tan-Tan informs Melonhead that she must go back to the bush to Abitefa, even after the humans' emotional reunion. The two females become each other's chosen family, effectively highlighting the bonds between family members without the tie of blood.

One of the stirring mother-child interactions in *Midnight Robber* occurs on New Half-Way Tree, when Tan-Tan beats a woman for using a switch to keep her full-grown son in line and at her beck and call (243).

When the protagonist begins to whip the woman's legs, she thinks only of protecting an innocent child: "She knew how it felt to cry out so, to beg mercy and get none" (244). In this instance, Tan-Tan overtly substitutes "Mamee" for her abusive father, against whom she desires to strike out. When Alyosius threatens Tan-Tan for coming between him and his mother, Tan-Tan wonders, "How could he love her when she hurt him like that?" (245), and she begins to sing in the voice of the Robber Queen: "You treat he worse than dog, yet he love you like hog love mud. My father was a king, and my mother was he queen. . . . [E]ven with all that, I never feel a love like this man just show for this woman he mother. Compere, don't wear it out" (245).

Reading this scene, Shaw argues, "Her bewilderment gives us a glimpse into the hurt done to Tan-Tan by her father. She still loved him so much that when he hurt her she had to split her personality to deal with it, yet she cannot recognize this phenomenon in others. Tan-Tan does not stop to self-examine, but attempts direct intervention instead" (5). Yet Tan-Tan's failure to "self-examine" is more than simple delusion; this type of thinking is encouraged in all people by the social forces that posit parental love as infinite. Mamee certainly represents Antonio in the passage, but it is possible that she represents Ione as well. As stated previously, Tan-Tan's mother listened to her childhood cries with ears almost deaf. Interestingly, the Robber Queen's command not to "wear it out" suggests that love can erode; ties between biological parents and children are neither inherent nor eternal.

Tan-Tan cannot help but examine her life and relationships when the intense suffering that she has endured at the hands of her father results in pregnancy. She has her first abortion at age 14; at 16, realizing that Antonio has once again impregnated her, she states, "And what I go call it, eh? Son or

brother? . . . I can't give birth to this thing, Abitefa. Is a monster. I rip one of the brutes out of me once, I could do it twice" (233). Poking at her stomach, she imagines "the demon inside" and prays for cramps that would miscarry it (257). Rubbing her hand over her stomach, she fantasizes about digging her fingers in and extirpating the thing she cannot imagine to be human, much less her own offspring: "I need to kill it before it grow any more" (235). All she can think about is "this baby eating out my insides" (236). She sees her pregnancy as not only a war between parasite and host but also between her predator father and her preyed-upon self, and as the reincarnated baby-ghost of her father who will haunt her forever. She states, "I tell you true, if I don't lost this baby, I go kill myself" (236).

Besides conceiving of the fetus as monster, demon, devil, and parasite, she also thinks of it as a prison from which she needs "to buy herself freedom" (237). Significantly, this last construction names the intersection of Tan-Tan's race and gender. The language echoes the rhetoric of enslaved people struggling to emancipate themselves, and it suggests as well feminist theory that critiques patriarchal images of women as incubators, valuable for nothing but bearing children:

"Resentfully Tan-Tan dug her fingers into her stomach. The defiant thing inhabiting her didn't yield. Her head pounded with anger. She could only drink what it let her, eat what it permitted. . . . [T]his thing inside her was keeping her strong and healthy like horse, a good horse to carry it" (255). She is objectified and bestialized as womb entirely and nothing more.¹³

Shortly after her reunion with Melonhead, Tan-Tan shifts to calling the fetus the "soon-to-be-baby" (313). She reclaims her life from her father's intrusive presence when she decides that she has "two lives to save; hers and the pickney's," and firmly declares her stake in the baby's life, as the parent to whom he truly belongs: "The

damned pickney was hers" (321). When it is born, she sees that the baby's features are Antonio's "but they were her features too, *hers*" (328). Taking leave of Melonhead near the end of the novel in order to return to the bush and Abitefa, Tan-Tan holds her pregnant belly "protectively" and begins to walk "with or without him" (328). This line proposes that the mother-child connection is valued over that of "wife" and "husband," as, apparently, is the bond between the "sisters."¹⁴ A crucial aspect of Hopkinson's presentation of this maternal bond is the community, rather than the individual parent, who will raise the child. This same ideology penetrates Tan-Tan's realization that Abitefa insists that she bear the baby because "When Tefa came of eggbearing age, if she couldn't or wouldn't look after one of her own pickney, her chosen nestmates would, or another nest" (236). The community privileges chosen family over biological ties.

Hopkinson's message is reinforced by Tan-Tan's decision to adopt a "rolling calf"—a supposedly dangerous creature feared by most of New Half-Way Tree's inhabitants—after she kills its mother in self-defense. She says, "[I]s my fault. I frighten she and she attack. I couldn't abandon the pup after that" (308). When Tan-Tan approaches, "Snuffling with joy, the rolling calf pup rushed Tan-Tan, narrowly missing her with one of its horns" (308). Clumsy rather than vicious, the animal becomes a part of Tan-Tan's new family. In the same way, douens live in a "daddy tree" (186), a residence that protects and provides for them, and is named as if a member of the family. When the douens must chop the tree down, the elder Res begins to keen: "Tan-Tan caught the words for 'home' and 'food' and 'thank you.' The wail got louder. So a child would lament a dead parent. Other douens joined in. . . . Tan-Tan felt say she didn't have any right to be part of their mourning, but the tree had held her in its arms too. Quietly she

whispered, 'Thanks. . . ' " (277). Shaw regards the tree as parallel to Antonio; it is a good father in direct opposition to Antonio as bad father: "The daddy tree is a direct contrast to Antonio, as it provides shelter and without asking anything in return" (Shaw 3).

Connection, not contrast, receives Hopkinson's emphasis through Chichibud's commentary to Tan-Tan: "And sometimes the tree need to prune, oui?" (282). Either way, this positive father figures distinctly as adoptive rather than biological parent.

In depicting communal relationships—specifically female bonds like those between Tan-Tan and Abitefa—that strengthen and sustain participants more than do those between individual men and women, Hopkinson thoroughly critiques the actions of Janisette, who places her loyalties with Antonio instead of with his helpless child, her stepdaughter. Reminiscent of the traditional fairy tale's "evil stepmother," this woman's intense jealousy towards Tan-Tan reappears throughout the novel to demonstrate her greater investment in her position as wife than as mother.¹⁵

Janisette holds the potential to be Tan-Tan's savior during her childhood. On the night of the first rape, Tan-Tan longs to "call out to Janisette for help" (140), but she is too ashamed. After Tan-Tan kills her father in self-defense, Janisette begins the hunt to bring her to justice. The protagonist finally confronts her stepmother, accusing her of being complicit not only in the killing, but in the abuse: "Is you give me the knife to do [the killing] with. Don't tell me you never used to hear what Antonio was doing to me. Is you see my trial and never have courage to speak up. So why you hunting me now, woman, when I only do what you give me tools to do?" (325). In truth, Janisette *has* known about the rapes, but blames Tan-Tan as a jezebel: "You think I ain't know? Slut! You woulda screw anything in sight, including your own father! . . . Is you drive he to it! You know what I had to live with,

knowing my own husband prefer he force-ripe, picky-head daughter to me?" (271). Tan-Tan's public declaration of the abuse brings Janisette to tears: initially, they are tears of fury and not compassion. However, by the end of the encounter, she stands "suck dry" of her hate and anger, consumed by sorrow, with a face that is "a mask of grief" (326). The character undergoes no miraculous transformation into a kind and forgiving/forgiven mother figure. More realistically, perhaps, she must live out the rest of her isolated days in awareness of her choices to side with the strong—both in terms of age and gender—instead of the weak.

As numerous western feminist critics have argued, defining womanhood exclusively through the ability to reproduce is a reductive and confining concept.¹⁶ Nussbaum suggests that "[r]eformulating the maternal to separate the reproductive body from mother care and to recognize the way maternal power is distinct from (re)productive activity allows us to question maternity as the central metaphor for female difference" (23-24). In addition, recognizing "maternal power" and affectionate bonds that are separate from biological reproduction are also crucial to validating the transhistorical experiences of people of the African diaspora, and necessary for rebuilding a communal identity that refuses to be bound by the individualism and potential isolation inherent in the biological model.

This point can easily be extended and applied to the contemporary state of affairs in the US public child welfare system. The number of African

American women who have voluntarily placed their children into the system for adoption has always been low as compared to that of their White counterparts, perhaps because of a historical legacy of other-mothering and extensive kinship networks in the diasporic community.¹⁷ The number of children forcibly taken from their birth parents and put into foster care, however, increases each year, and, tragically, African American children are among the groups of children considered hardest to place (along with differently-abled children, those with severe illnesses, children over 10 years of age, and groups of three or more siblings). Despite the encouraging results of a recent University of Chicago study, which found that African American children from urban areas experienced the greatest increases in the likelihood of adoption per year during the 1990s, researchers stressed that their numbers needed to be qualified: "[I]t is important to remember that overall rates of adoption among African American children from urban areas are still slower than adoptions involving all other children. That is, while there have been significant gains, the fact remains that it takes African American children longer to be adopted than Caucasian children" (Wulczyn n.p.). One step toward improving the condition of thousands of children caught within the system would be the reevaluation of our concepts of womanhood and motherhood, and what constitutes a "real" family.

1. Rody, for example, examines the ways that American women writers of African descent portray the conventional history of slavery and colonization as "a metamyth of mother-daughter separation," followed by the often-fantastic romance of a daughter returning to a "mother-of-history" figure (8). By foregrounding mother-daughter relationships to examine historical trauma, particularly New World slavery, authors reveal that the familial, personal, "affective dimension" is "inseparable from the political dimension" of the texts and of reality (4). For a more extensive discussion of the connections between historical and political narratives and the representations of mother-daughter relationships, see Rody.

2. See also the work of Louis Montrose, who cites one of Sir Walter Raleigh's lieutenants as writing: "Here [in the Americas] whole shires of fruitfull rich grounds, lying now waste for want of people, do prostitute themselves unto us, like a faire and beautifull woman, in the pride and floure of desired yeeres" (18). The statement clearly relieves the European explorers of any imperial or sexual agency, and thus any potential moral guilt. Correspondingly, Mossman locates in the 19th-century works of Michelet and Zola a desire to "occupy" the maternal body and, by extension, the French colonial territories: "Through a cartography of uterine annexation, a phenomenon which I here refer to as gynocolonization, mastery of birth at last accedes to the status of foreign policy" (140).

3. There was also a lesser-known rebel named Nanny in Barbadian history: Nanny Grigg, an enslaved woman from Simmon's plantation, was literate, knowledgeable about the Haitian revolution, and has been identified by historian Hilary Beckles as "the revolutionary ideologue" of the slaves who were involved in an 1816 insurrection, the only physical war that enslaved people in Barbados initiated to gain their freedom (171).

4. Shaw, too, identifies Granny Nanny as a "benevolent parent-force" (7).

5. The ideology echoes the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of religion, speech, press, peaceful assembly, and the redress of grievances, but does not establish these civil liberties as absolute; rather, they are limited by the rights of other individuals.

6. Interestingly, when the character Cudjoe's shoddily constructed houses fall and kill some of Toussaint's inhabitants, it is "Nanny's guidance to the Mocambo [court] . . . that Cudjoe should be made to learn his trade properly" (144); however, the human Mocambo judge him more harshly and instead send him into exile. Nanny is not a draconian dictator by any means.

7. A corresponding incongruity between image and fact can be seen in European explorers proclaiming their exploits as honoring "Mother England," thus apparently showing esteem and respect for the maternal role. However, although European women were cast as giving birth to the Nation, both literally and symbolically, the men in control of these definitions and other institutions of power denied women true political and social agency. And therefore, for example, although Queen Elizabeth strategically manipulated the land/woman trope to aggrandize, rather than subordinate, herself (having the Virginia "virgin" territory claimed and named for herself, for instance), and later Queen Caroline also exerted notable influence over political affairs, their powers did not necessarily translate into social power for the majority of [white] British female subjects. Furthermore, the implications of the maternal metaphors are dire for the Amerindian, Asian, and African subject according to the metaphor: feminized colonized lands become hapless victims, passively prone, while colonized women themselves are situated in the midst of a civilized/savage (and often virgin/whore) paradigm: "The eighteenth-century Englishwoman climbs on the back of the savage woman to her pedestal. . . . [T]he primitive woman's labor of both kinds is harnessed to the interests of empire" (Nussbaum 53).

8. Cf. Alexander, Nasta, and Rody.

9. The narrator compares the journey to being "trapped in a confining space, being taken away from home like the long time ago Africans" (74). This escape, while representing a reverse Middle Passage for Antonio, in that it represents movement from imprisonment to freedom rather than liberty to enslavement, actually serves more as the traditional journey to enslavement for Tan-Tan, who has no choice but to go and also becomes psychologically enslaved to her father.

10. Interestingly enough, Antonio is identified by one interviewer as evolving "from buffoonish to evil" (Soyka, "Interview" 4). I am forced to wonder what part of the characterization strikes the reader as ridiculous. Might it be that the tender loving father role is so foreign to most people that it comes across as clownish? The figure of Chichibud is an exceptionally nurturing father—he takes care of Tan-Tan after the rape by and ensuing murder of Antonio (169): "Chichibud bundled her out of the house, talking soothingly to her the whole time" (170). In contrast to his female partner's physical protection of Tan-Tan, Chichibud's protection in the douen settlement consists primarily of a verbal defense. In this way, Hopkinson reverses traditional gender roles and provides us with a positive male figure. However, the figure is distinctly non-human; thus, readers might find his behavior believable and acceptable.

11. In response to criticism that her work depicts men of African descent as "shiftless sexual predators" who reinforce mainstream society's stereotypical views of Black men, Hopkinson describes her intention to create characters—male and female—who are not "clearly good or evil, but a more complex mixture" (Soyka, "Literature" 4). She also points to the gentle, loving, industrious character of Melonhead, a contrast to Antonio. Significantly, the novel ends on the figure of Tubman, Tan-Tan's male baby who, named after Harriet Tubman (also known as *A Woman Called Moses*), symbolizes freedom and brings hope for the future.

One interpretation of Hopkinson's novel reads Antonio's escape from Toussaint to the hard physical labor of New Half-Way Tree as a metaphor for the experiences of enslaved Africans: "Antonio's

abuse of his child could be explained—though hardly excused—as resulting from his forced separation from his wife” (Soyka, “Interview” 4). This reading is problematic in that it posits that the rending of families so common during slavery would have led to repeated instances of sexual abuse and incest. On the contrary, Hopkinson’s novel alludes to the creation of strong alternative families once the original biological forms become destroyed.

12. In “How Tan-Tan Learn to Thief,” one of the story-legends from the frame narrative, lone and Janisette are conflated: “Tan-Tan had a maid to bring she nice things, name of lone, though sometimes people would call she Janisette” (79).

13. Abitefa strongly opposes Tan-Tan’s desire to terminate her pregnancy; she ironically sees the fetus as a “gift from the daddy tree” (233). The irony is obvious: it is Tan-Tan’s father who impregnated her.

14. While the bond between Tan-Tan and Abitefa reads sororally, the potential for a homoerotic reading is also valid. Hopkinson cultivates homosexual themes in the novel; queer relationships dot the narrative landscape, as between Fimbar and Philomise, “life partners and business partners since God was a boy, oui? Two people, one mind” (39); Claude, who maintains relationships with both One-Eye (male) and Aislin (female); and the female pedicab driver whose family consists of “[t]hree z’amie wives” (4) and her “baby father” (7), the man who has fathered her children.

15. In this way, she resembles characters from other Caribbean diasporic texts, including Ella, Gennie’s stepmother in Lorde’s *Zami* (1982), and Maureen, Hyacinth’s stepmother in Riley’s *The Unbelonging* (1985).

16. While white, US “second wave” feminists such as Adrienne Rich and Nancy Chodorow come immediately to mind, examples abound in African diasporic communities as well. In *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta subverts the popular conception of motherhood as the sole source of a woman’s satisfaction. Warner-Vieyra’s *Juletane* (1982) similarly details how a traditional African framework that considers motherhood the core of womanhood contributes to the mental breakdown of a woman who cannot meet these standards. In the US African American context, Neal’s *Soul Babies* (2002), particularly the chapter “Baby Mama (Drama) and Baby Daddy (Trauma),” asserts that celebrations of Black womanhood through celebrations of Black motherhood primarily serve to reinscribe Black patriarchy.

17. From 1952 to 1972, for example, only 1.5% of African American women with premarital births placed their children for adoption, compared to 19.3% of European-American women. Between 1982 and 1988, the numbers were 1.1% for Black women and 3.2% for White women. See survey analysis by Christine A. Bachrach, et al. (1992).

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