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Sins of the Mother(land): Presence, Absence, and Self in Caribbean Literature

To the imperialist there is perhaps no greater endeavor than exploration. While seemingly innocuous—the term after all connotes only an innocent interest—exploration has become in Western hands the philosophy behind which mass oppression, cruelty, colonization, and economic privilege hide. The "ship" is a very important vehicle in Western exploration, acting not only as a means of physical conveyance, but more importantly as "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (Gilroy 4). It is the ship then, or contemporaneously, the aircraft, spaceship, submarine, all-terrain vehicle, and helicopter, or abstractly, the internet, satellite, and media, that allows Western presence, both physically and psychically, to enter and ultimately occupy the non-Western world[1]—crossing actual and cultural borders with little more than a nod. However, another border the Western oppressor navigates is often ignored, left unprotected, and therefore used as a docking point for Western ideals, and that is the border of feminine space. When Western culture "assailed" the Caribbean, they viewed the territory as a virgin waiting to be ravaged, a conception that lends a decidedly feminine aspect to the process of colonization, pushing the female—an identity marginalized amongst the marginalized—to the forefront, by making her first the symbol of colonization itself, and secondly the site of colonial impregnation—the fertile ground plowed under that perpetuates the Western seed. Specifically

[1] By Western/non-Western I mean to indicate those first-world imperialist countries who commonly imposed their standards on New World/third-world locales, respectively, even though such locations are located in the "west."

looking to their feminine conquests, the purpose of this paper is to trace the oppressor's presence in the Caribbean, illustrating that Western colonization in the Caribbean took place largely in feminine space, since it was in the motherland as well as the mother that the Western force set its roots, finding a soil that, even in its absence, would bear and perpetuate the fruits of its labor. Through an exploration of Caribbean literature, namely Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, with references to Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* and Bartolomé De Las Casas' *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, I will establish the effects of Western colonization on the Caribbean female during both Western occupation and Western absence. Turning my focus from the Caribbean mother towards her daughter—the progeny of the colonized world—I will then investigate the tenuous binds and boundaries of the mother/daughter relationship, made especially tenuous under the Western gaze. Expanding my view to the modern Caribbean daughter I will examine her ability to define herself, or become, for the first time in many years, "self"—free from both the Western colonizer and her colonizing mother(land).

Perhaps Bartolomé De Las Casas' *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* is the best place to start in recounting the effects of colonial presence in the Caribbean. *A Short Account*, which serves as a historical record of colonial atrocities that go unabated under the name of God and country, is De Las Casas's attempt to halt the wholesale slaughter of Caribbean natives, a mission he believes will come to fruition upon Prince Philip's receipt of his findings. However, such faith in the Spanish crown is unfounded, since Western authority was largely complicit in the New World politics of conquest and destruction, as De Las Casas writes: "the island of Hispaniola was the first to witness the arrival of Europeans and the first to suffer the wholesale slaughter of its people" (14). The European presence in the Caribbean then, was one

of terror—"[t]hey forced their way into native settlements, slaughtering everyone they found there"—the ideal setting for an extended colonial stay.

Despite the terror they invoked, the colonizers insisted they came for the benefit of all humanity. This beneficence took the guise of "familial protection," casting the master/slave dichotomy as paternalistic, as Ian Gregory Strachan writes in *Paradise and Plantation*: "the treatment [slaves] receive[d] from their owners, is, as nearly as can be, that of a parent to his children" (74). This "paternalistic" view of slavery—and oppression generally—is a function of the Western belief that all outsiders are innocently ignorant of society and culture. Thus, the Westerner sees in the Other an earlier stage of himself, or "a vision of European civilization's childhood" (Strachan 72).

From its inception the parent-child bond between Other and overseer was characterized as "patriarchal," finding its maturation through "subjugation, authority, and punishment" (Strachan 74). However, I argue that Western colonization, while instigated by and touting the philosophy of patriarchy, is actually realized through the feminine form, at least after the large scale physical departure of the Western colonialist, which forced the oppressor to entrust the perpetuation of his ideals to the oppressed themselves, and who better to assume this duty than the most severely oppressed—or most easily controlled—women. Like a dutiful husband and father then, in the colonial agenda the Westerner's role was to condition his family for his eminent departure, preparing his symbolic "wife"—the Caribbean mother—to secure the integrity of the family, integrity largely defined by adherence to Western cultural standards.

This presence of terror masked as a mission of familial cultivation, precipitated a docile compliance in native peoples, eventually leading to a psychic state of unrecognized conformity to Western social mores, or to that new cultural race so desired by the Westerner—"the colonial

hybrid." The colonial hybrid is perhaps best described in comparison to the American ideal of "the melting pot," where Western "imperialism [creates] commonalities of experience that bind diverse and distant peoples under a meta-national, meta-ethnic, identity of 'the colonized'" (De Souza and Murdoch 134). As opposed to traditional critical ideas of the hybrid, métissage, and creole "as favored models of contemporary identity," the *colonial* hybrid is someone who, while of a different culture and/or race, fully assumes the colonial agenda (Munro 213). Like the American "melting pot," distinctive identity is erased in the colonial hybrid, creating instead an identity defined by cultural conformity despite biologic difference. The colonial hybrid as new colonial race is paramount to the Western project, in fact it is its legacy, and it is engendered through the meeting of the colonizer and the Caribbean mother, first through the colonizer's sublimation of the native mother, and secondly through the mother's sublimation of her own progeny due to her adherence to Western cultural standards.

The sublimation of the Caribbean mother is many layered. However, two interrelated aspects of her sublimation are especially pertinent to the present discussion, the colonial casting of mother as paradise and the Caribbean mother's status as "surrogate" or "nanny." The casting of the native mother as paradise reflects popular colonial myths of the Caribbean as "Edenic." For instance, "Columbus's journal configures the Gulf of Paria as the entrance to the 'terrestrial paradise'" (O'Callaghan 92). Thus, by equating the Caribbean mother with paradise the Western colonizer is able to confuse natural desire, realizing in a peaked affection towards the mother, who comes not only to represent nurture, but also paradise, the perpetuation of their agenda, since it is the Caribbean mother as colonial hybrid that calls to her children. "Contained in and on…Caribbean" paradisiacal mothers then, "are entire cultural landscapes," and it is *these* landscapes that continue, in the oppressor's absence, to demand colonial tribute, since it is

through them that the Caribbean mother is named "paradise," and therefore allotted a permanent foothold in the psyches of future generations, ensuring, through human desire, that colonial mores are perpetuated (Adjarian 11). As Jamaica Kincaid notes in "From Antigua to America": "'[I]t's not [the tourist] paradise that's a big influence on me…It's the paradise of mother in every way: the sort of benign, marvelous, innocent moment you have with the great powerful person, who, you then realize, won't let you go'" (147).

The sublimation of the Caribbean mother as "nanny" or "surrogate" is important for two reasons: it castes the Caribbean mother as the "rear[er] of white children," and it denotes a void (O'Callaghan 52). While Evelyn O'Callaghan argues in *Women Writing the West Indies* that "the most vital role of *white* women in the success of the colonizing project…was the bearing and rearing of white children," I argue that "the bearing and rearing of white children" was actually the colonizing duty/assignment of *Caribbean* women, since it was into their hands that the Western colonizing force caste both their physical and cultural progeny (52; italics mine). In this sense, the Caribbean mother "bears and rears" "white" children in two ways: she is responsible, as literal nanny, for the upbringing of Western children, including their indoctrination—to some extent—in Western ideals, and she acts as surrogate "white" mother to her own Caribbean children, since it is through her that they engender Western norms. Thus, "the bearing and rearing of white children" becomes in the Caribbean mother the bearing and rearing of children—no matter their color or heritage—who ultimately embody Western ideals.

Beyond "the bearing and rearing of white children," the view of the Caribbean mother as "nanny/surrogate" is also important because it denotes a void. To her progeny the "natural" mother is seen as misplaced, unattainable, or simply lost, removed "from her island offspring both in time and space" (Adjarian 2). Therefore, just as the mother's casting as "paradise"

ensured the confusion of natural biologic desire and unnatural attachment, so to does the view of the Caribbean mother as "nanny/surrogate," since it demands a desire for someone who is not immediately available. No matter how much their growth is stunted, their individuality squashed, "island offspring" cling to their mothers, happy to accept an eternal pseudo-childhood—the exact state of mind colonial forces wish to procure—if it means the reassurance of maternal care. Hence, this second aspect of the Caribbean mother as "nanny/surrogate," like the casting of mother as paradise, assures the colonial grip on future generations of Caribbeans, since it is through the woman they seek that they are enculturated. Interestingly, this idea of the Caribbean mother as surrogate also realizes the "true" mother(land) in a Western power. As M. M. Adjarian highlights, as much as children are "daughters of human mothers, they are daughters of specific (mother)lands," suggesting that the colonial use/abuse of the Caribbean mother as trope is an attempt to create a general desire for the Western motherland (i.e. England, Spain, the United States) in non-native peoples (11).

Having established the colonial sublimation of the Caribbean mother, it is now pertinent to turn to the Caribbean mother's sublimation of her daughter, a sublimation that is generously explored in the work of Jamaica Kincaid. While the whole of Kincaid's body of work can be characterized as tales of the oppressive mother—as Strachan notes "Kincaid sees the mother-child relationship as symbolic of the abuses of power so typical of colonialism"—one of the most interesting points of Kincaid's literary exploitation, and the way her work most acutely relates to the present discussion, is her development of the mother/daughter relationship in step with the development of the colonial agenda (255). Consisting of three major stages—conformity, questioning, and decision—each phase of the mother-daughter/colonial relationship directly relates to one of the aspects of the colonized Caribbean mother described above. For

instance, in *Annie John* Kincaid "describes the initial stage of the mother-daughter relationship…as a moment of safety, total trust, and complete harmony," and Annie, "reflecting on this harmony, says, 'It was in such a paradise that I lived,'" which parallels the colonial sublimation of the Caribbean mother as paradise (Strachan 256; Kincaid qtd. in Strachan 256).

Similarly, the second step of the mother-daughter/colonial relationship that Kincaid explores is maturation—largely characterized by questioning—and its impending difficulties. As Kincaid illustrates through Annie's attempts to assert her own identity, to differentiate herself from her mother's teachings—her experiences, she soon realizes that her "mother will not let go," and when she persists in her nonconformity finally turns from her:

> What a new thing this was for me: my mother's back turned on me in disgust. It was true that I didn't spend all my days at my mother's side before this, that I spent most of my days at school, but before this young-lady business I could sit and think of my mother, see her doing one thing or another, and always her face bore a smile for me. Now I often saw her with the corners of her mouth turned down in disapproval of me (Strachan 256; Kincaid 28).

Through her maturation then, Annie experiences for the first time the void created by the lost mother—or the alacritous turn of the challenged oppressor—that individual represented through the Caribbean mother's sublimation as "nanny/surrogate."

This experience of prison in what was once "idyllic comfort" confuses Annie, causing her to awake, as the speaker of Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* describes, "in the false paradise" in which she was both born and "will die, the same landscape that [she] had always known" but that has been transformed, "at once beautiful, ugly, humble, and proud; full of life, full of death, able to sustain the one, inevitably claim the other" (Strachan 256; 32). In such a

state Annie is faced with a decision—Will she conform or will she pursue her individuality?—a question that is readily answered in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*.

Because of her attachment to her mother, Amabelle, the protagonist of Danticat's novel, refuses to see the reality of the tumultuous, ethnocentric Dominican Republic around her, as she states: "I had been living inside dreams that would not go away, the memories of an orphaned child. When the present itself was truly frightful. I had perhaps purposely chosen not to see it" (143). Thus, because of an unnatural attachment to her absent mother, Amabelle becomes the victim of racial/cultural atrocities, unable to see the problems of her situation due to her overwhelming desire for comfort, care, and belonging in her surrogate mother(land). Through a physical and psychical separation then, an environment was created that "stunted" Amabelle, leaving her dependent on a surrogate mother(land) that wished to kill rather than nurture her. So, for a very long time, Amabelle chose to stay where she knew she would be hurt because she was afraid of losing—once again—that which she was only so lucky to gain a second time, a mother and a motherland.

This pattern of negative dependence is not uncommon in Caribbean progeny, rather it is the norm, since the Western colonizer has assured that to choose individuality over his ideals is to also choose to give up any possibility of a mother's love, a cost that forces many people to choose fidelity over individuality/need/desire. For example, in *The House on the Lagoon* Rosario Ferré describes the lengths many Puerto Ricans went to to secure the favor of that looming mother country, the United States: "Although hungry and often dressed in rags, these islanders…managed to purchase twelve thousand three hundred and eighty-three dollars in bonds, their contribution to the defense of the powerful nation" that they hoped would give them

statehood (21). Hence, in the shadow of great loss—great maternal love—most choose to please those who promise to protect them, even after they are scourged, over and over again.

However, there are those who refuse to conform, and Annie is one of them. Annie made the decision to forsake her mother(land), to move on, to pursue her individuality. Leaving Antigua and her mother for the last time, Annie remarks: "I dragged myself away from her and backed off a little, and then I shook myself, as if to wake myself out of a stupor. We looked at each other for a long time with smiles on our faces, but I know the opposite of that was in my heart," a statement which indicates Annie's remarkable ability to lift herself out of her circumstance as a colonial hybrid and become a "rebel" (Kincaid 147). While it would have been much easier to conform, to become that "copycat" colonial hybrid, Annie saw something more, and chose to disrupt the integrity of the father's house, a house created in a land where it did not belong, sheltering individuals that it should not be sheltering. So, by giving her "*I*'s/eyes that" were able to "speak and read between the lines of…[the] master(s) discourses," Kincaid, as "writerly mother," placed Annie among those "New World fictional daughters" who are able to "resist the forces that have not only exploited mute geographies but have also proscribed the voiced and inscribed utterances of gendered, raced, and/or classed selves" (Adjarian 12). Therefore, whereas the colonial hybrid was the victim of the landscape imposed on her by the Western gaze, in fact *became* that landscape, symbolizing to the colonizer the conquered and the tamed, or his own personal paradise perpetuated by his own personal philosophies, the rebel creates her *own* landscape, exploring territory left yet untouched by the colonizer—her own history. The final step in the colonial relationship then, is the movement away from the colonized Caribbean mother and towards the true mother(land), the spirit that bears, nurtures,

and develops every human soul—individuality: "In my sleep, I see my mother rising, like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her" (Danticat 208).

In conclusion, while the imperialist assumes the guise of "exploration" to obtain "paradise" and ravage "virgin" territory, the rebel "New World daughter" utilizes exploration to investigate the nuances of her own identity, attempting with every turn to discover and cultivate *herself*. As opposed to the colonial project then, with its overwhelming emphasis on the cultivation of its identity in others, the project of the rebel daughter is one of individuality, procuring for oneself, not what is the same in all others, but unique personality, a space often lost amongst ideas of cultural supremacy as well as cultural harmony. Building from the groundbreaking ideas realized in Gloria Anzaldúa's "new mestiza"—an identity constructed from two or more existing cultures—the desire of the New World rebel daughter is to fully realize in herself an identity that can be no one's but her *own*. Having experienced the extreme price of constructed identity, the rebel is perhaps more invested than anyone in finding and accepting that place that leaves her standing as "one," since it was she who gave up both mother and motherland in an attempt to find that precious, solitary, individuality that leaves her accountable only to herself. Finally, in a world where guise after guise is assumed to mask true motive and identity, the New World rebel daughter is an individual who throws off every guise—cultural, gendered, racial, national—in an effort to experience no boundaries to personal development, in an effort to halt the oppressor's perpetuation, and in an effort to redeem that mother(land) whose sins have so mired her progress. However, the path of the rebel is a long road, and she faces many obstacles, but she is present—in part—in many women, trying to make her way towards that solitary place:

This account of my life has been an account of my mother's life as much as it has been an account of mine, even so, again it is an account of the life of the children I did not have, as it is their account of me. In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from. In me are the voices that should have come out of me, the faces I never allowed to form, the eyes I never allowed to see me. This account is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become" (Kincaid, Autobiography 228).

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