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The Sacred Mothers, the Evil Witches and the Politics of Household in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

Central to this paper is the concept of subversive household as a locus of spirituality and political power of mothering. I explore how this household (home of women drifters and cultural transgressors) counters the traditional exclusion of women from the socio-political structures of power, and reinscribes the phallogocentric authority with spiritual values of the maternal. In particular, I address Morrison's figure of Consolata in her spectacular transition from a depressed woman to a healing and spiritual authority in charge of a convent. I posit this transition as a specifically maternal resistance against the oppressive conservative power of the Black community that is set to exterminate Consolata's household. Out of this maternal resistance, the newly established power of the household negotiates between the sacred and the heretic spaces of culture which I discuss in reference to the theories of Julia Kristeva and Catherine Clément. Finally, I address the political effectiveness of Morrison's proposal of the maternal sacredness that succeeds in reinvesting the displaced women with spiritual integrity but in the end has to take refuge in the transcendental.

In her article "Some Call it Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity," Nancy Armstrong suggests that political power is closely associated with the modern household, rather than with the clinic which Foucault believed provided "the proto-institutional setting" (1997: 918).¹ "Home," overseen by a woman, actually precedes the formation of other social institutions, and as a locus of female authority and creativity it challenges the phallogocentric sphere of the public. As Mary Tew Douglas (1969) and Simone de Beauvoir (1993) argued, a housewife is a transformer of natural products into cultural ones. Being responsible for preserving the boundaries between natural and cultural life, she shifts matter out of place into matter in place (Douglas 1969: 40).²

With her fire going, woman becomes sorceress; by a simple movement, as in beating eggs, or through the magic of fire, she effects the transmutation of substances: matter becomes food. There is enchantment in these alchemies, there is poetry in making preserves; the housewife has caught duration in the snare of sugar, she has enclosed life in jars. (de Beauvoir, 1993: 476)

However, when this process is disrupted by some culturally abject or illegal activity such as witchcraft, “the authority and identity of the housewife are put in question; she can no longer predict or control the processes of transformation required” (Purkiss 1996: 97). She becomes a witch, the symbolic anti-housewife figure, responsible for disorder, hysteria and other processes of contamination. Simultaneously, “witchcraft depositions reveal that the boundaries of the home were always being crossed,” while “the notion of the house as a closed container” appears “at odds with the identity of the housewife as a member of the community” (Purkiss, 1996: 98). According to Armstrong, once the household “changes into an impenetrable place of magic forces, escaping control of the authorities, every attempt will be made to destroy it” (1997: 918). Similarly, Diane Purkiss writes that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century moralist literature of domestic conduct chains the “virtuous” wife to “house” where she stays and does housework. “The physical boundaries of property” are thus “identified with the social boundaries of propriety. As well as remaining within the boundaries of the household and ordering its contents, woman was represented as guarding its resources from overflowing or escaping into the general economy” (1996: 98). In order to preserve its access and relation to power and knowledge, the dominant cultural discourse (community, clique) will persecute everything that disturbs and shifts the boundaries of that relation.

This is precisely the case in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1998), in which the conservative Afro-American community called Ruby cannot cope with the “newcomers” who inhabit an abandoned convent at the edge of their settlement: “If they stayed to themselves, that’d be something. But they don’t. They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families” (1998: 276). For Morrison, the concept of a subversive household (different from the models carefully designed in the interests of patriarchy) counters the traditional exclusion of women from the socio-political structures of power. This power, understood so far as a multiplicity of discourses produced by mechanisms operating in different (but all male-dominated) institutions, is undercut in Morrison’s narrative with a discourse of depression, hysteria and distress. These emerge in the narrative as subversive forms of sub-cultural expression of race and gender. The surfacing of the witch figure as a container for these forms is at once empowering and incompatible with the dominant discourse:

Something's going on out there, and I don't like any of it. No men. Kissing on themselves. Babies hid away. Jesus! No telling what else... I hear they drink like fish too... Bitches. More like witches... Before those heifers came to town this was a peaceable kingdom. The others before them at least had some religion. These here are sluts out there by themselves never step foot in church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickel they ain't thinking about one either. (Morrison, 1998: 276)

The suspicious and polluting convent “in some desolate part of the American West” (1998: 224) was always already “entitled to special treatment” (1998: 233), since it was previously inhabited by “Catholic women with no male mission to control them.” Those who have come now to inhabit the abandoned mission are “obviously not nuns, real or even pretend, but members, it was thought, of some other cult” (1998: 11). In fact, the newly arrived women are homeless, exploited, and hysterical daughters, or mothers (to be). In finding a “temporary” lodging in the convent (where they “stop by to recover”), they cross a borderline between “what is out there where they come from” (the oppressive paternal structures) and what is “inside.” The unknown inside of the convent reverses the patriarchal norm by expelling it to the “outside,” excluding it from its “center.” The “inside” promises shelter and rest, it speaks a different language, neither inviting nor rejecting but strategically ignoring and thereby coping with the “outside.”

Over the past eight years they had come. The first one, Mavis, during Mother's long illness; the second right after she died. Then two more. Each one asking permission to linger a few days but never actually leaving. Now and then one or another packed a scruffy little bag, said goodbye and seemed to disappear for a while—but only for a while. They always come back to stay on, living like mice in a house no one, not even the tax collector, wanted, with a woman in love with cemetery. Consolata looked at them through her bronze or gray or blue of her various sunglasses and saw broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying. (Morrison, 1998: 222)

Consolata, the last “legitimate” resident of the convent, is depicted by Morrison as a “confused” woman who suffers from depression and extensive consumption of alcohol. As a nine-year-old, and already no longer a virgin, she was “rescued” by the Mother, an ambitious missionary, from the severe conditions of her life in Mexico, and brought to the convent. There, in the environment of another phallogocentric structure, she has been taught to reject the ordinary female condition as impure. For 30 years “she offered her body and her soul to God's Son and His Mother as completely as if she had taken the veil herself” (Morrison, 1998: 225). As a “typical Christian conundrum, oppressive

and liberating at once,” (Warner, 1990: 77) the convent becomes her home, her element, and a structure that she is never to abandon but rather to transform. Defined by a cultural transgression quite incompatible with the proper order, Consolata represents an intermediary figure, introducing from the very beginning her strangeness, her irony, and her latent atheism into the paternal religion. She is a foreign national, a dutiful nun, a passionate lover, a depressed woman, and finally a “witch” at odds with the notion of a housewife who resolutely maintains the boundaries of home. On the contrary, she opens up her household to the chaotic and disorganized “outside”: the lesbian, the bad mother, the hysteric, all types of women stigmatized as “out of control.” Suspending the sublime model of the virginal life, Consolata “runs” the convent in a permanent erasure of the nun in herself, in a disabling state of being non-mother, no-body. If she seems strange, it is because of her alienation, her acknowledgment of the unbridgeable gap between self and the other, self and the “outside.” Separated from the two people she loved, first from her lover and then from the Mother, Consolata gradually succumbs to melancholy and drinking. Repelled by her own “sluglike existence” (that of a menopausal crone), she seems to tolerate the other women’s “resignation, self-pity, mute rage, disgust and shame” (Morrison, 1998: 250). Their experiences connect them, and blurring the border between them and her, they tell a common story of drift, deception and cultural displacement.

As drifters, all Morrison’s women “oscillate” in an oppressive atmosphere between normality and the asylum. Silently breaking the rules and silently being condemned, they end up like H el ene Cixous’ heretics “in confinement,” in isolation, and eventually “in death” (Cixous and Cl ement, 1986: 8). The longer they dwell among themselves, the more intense their bodies become, and the less “coordinated” their physical behavior. These are anxious women, disillusioned and disinterested in “proper” housekeeping:

Not only did they nothing except the absolutely necessary, they had no plans to do anything. Instead of plans they had wishes... They spoke of men who came to caress them in their sleep; of men waiting for them in the desert or by cool water; of men who once had desperately loved them, or men who should have loved them, might have loved, would have. (Morrison, 1998: 222-223)

The women’s “dwelling” and their bisexuality expand thus into an unbalanced, hysterical condition, and increasingly threaten to break out beyond control; the women are the “go-go girls: pink shorts, skimpy tops, see-through skirts; painted eyes, no lipstick; obviously no underwear, no stockings” (Morrison, 1998: 156). While for them the gradually collapsing convent symbolizes security, for the town nearby it is a haunted house, horrifying precisely because it contains secrets in disruptive excess. The convent’s “kitchen is bigger than the house in which either man [from the town] was born” (1998: 5). In the cell-

rooms there is no “proper” furniture, hammocks replace beds, and “strange things [are] nailed or taped to the walls or propped in a corner”:

A 1968 calendar ... a letter written in blood so smeary its satanic message cannot be deciphered; an astrology chart; a fedora tilted on the plastic neck of a female torso... the series of infant booties and shoes ribboned to a cord hanging from a crib in the last bedroom they enter. A teething ring, cracked and stiff, dangles among the tiny shoes. (Morrison, 1998: 7)

Viewed from Ruby’s phallogentric perspective, the convent goes astray, transgresses and transforms into a coven, a den of non-structure, and “a carefully planned disguise for what [is] really going on” (Morrison, 1998: 11). It is a place at the edge of culture, a locus of subversive intention, with no “cross of Jesus,” no men, no language (1998: 7). Both the co(n)ven(t) and its inhabitants are culturally formless, symbolically embracing the boundless body of the witch, her ability to transform into other bodies, or to change shape and disappear. It frightens by invoking uncertainty about the witch’s “true” identity, her intention and her course of action: “Scary things not always outside. Most scary things is inside” (1998: 39). As a metaphor for unspoken female *jouissance*, the convent’s “inside” epitomizes an impenetrable maternal womb. The sphere is ambiguously polluted, seductive, suspending “the notion of the house as a closed container” (Purkiss, 1996: 98). Its self-contained, maternal character echoes the earlier days of the convent, when self-sufficient nuns

made sauces and jellies and European bread. Sold eggs, peppers, hot relish and angry barbecue sauce, which they advertised on a square of cardboard covering the faded blue and white name of the school... Pecan saplings planted in the forties were strong in 1960. The Convent sold the nuts, and when pies from the harvest were made, they went as soon as posted. They made rhubarb pie so delicious it made customers babble, and the barbecue sauce got a heavenly reputation based on the hellfire peppers. (Morrison, 1998: 242)

The luring, transformative capacity of the convent increases after the collapse of the missionaries, and in offering shelter to the exploited it threatens to seduce the daughters of patriarchy away from their “proper” gender roles (“women whose identity rested on the men they married” [Morrison, 1998: 187]). And it is above all the independent status of the convent that endangers the carefully re-enacted center-edge hierarchy of the conservative Afro-American community. The road connecting the town with the convent represents an umbilical cord connecting the phallic children with the maternal space of filth; it has an explicitly female character since “it was women who walked this road. Never men” (1998: 270).

For more than twenty years Lone had watched them. Back and forth, back and forth; crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost. . . . out here where the wind handles you like a man, women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. They were the only pedestrians. (Morrison, 1998: 270)

Moreover, the unpredictable inside of the convent connects all the culturally suspicious activities: the stillborn babies, abortions, alcohol, wickedness and filthy music: “And in the Convent were those women” (Morrison, 1998: 11). Morrison goes on to narrate the story of their extermination, which happens as a result of the community’s fear of losing its masterfully attained racial/cultural identity. Perhaps, “somewhere else they could have been accepted . . . But not here. Not in Ruby” (1998: 157). Ruby is where nine

handsome, utterly black men murdered five harmless women (a) because the women were impure (not 8-rock [pure black race]); (b) because the women were unholy (fornicators at least, abortionists at most); and (c) because they could—which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the “deal” required. (1998: 297)

In the meantime, however, unaware of this conspiracy, Consolata, along with her the entire convent, undergoes a spiritual metamorphosis. Discovered by Lone, the “practicing” woman from Ruby, she is introduced into the practice of “stepping into” people’s souls since Consolata is a gifted healer, as Lone expected “from the start” (1998, 245). Though finding it “repugnant” at first, Consolata soon discovers the usefulness and necessity of utilizing her healing powers. Thus, while transgressing and transforming the paternal cult, she finally succeeds in finding “another sacred space” (Kristeva and Clément, 2001: 64) and another cultural, or rather subcultural, possibility within the paternal. Nostalgia and depression, as Kristeva believes, “are indispensable” in this process, since it is “only in mourning the old seductions and beliefs of our ancestors, in exhausting their artificial spark in the accounting of a sober meditation, that we can move in the direction of new truths” (2001: 142). Consolata’s extensive mourning in the cellar indeed leads her out of depression and into the “discovery” of spirituality that has specifically maternal character. It rests on the assumption of a symbiosis and meditative interconnectedness of all cohabitants of the household and requires a substantial change of their behaviour. What Consolata manages then is a completion of two parallel tasks: that of a mother (a household figure) who introduced order into the scattered home structure and that of a healer who provides that structure with a spiritual support. “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” (Morrison, 1989: 262). Although scared by such

an unexpected transformation of the woman they learned to ignore, none of the inhabitants leaves the convent. Their quest seems to be ending at its collapsing doors, while the convent itself with its persistently re-occurring maternal quality becomes a metaphor for the “omphalos”: the navel as the scar of dependence on the mother. Favoring the “omphalic” as a source of effective subversion, Morrison’s “mother” (Consolata) negotiates as such between the “phallic” and the (om-phalic) spaces of religion. The latter, composed of cultural splits and fissures, remains unarticulated in the paternal cult. Consolata can be thus seen as a spiritual negotiator, mediating between the “symbolic castration” that denies her the ability or right to speak the symbolic language and the “real incision” that draws/lures her back to unspoken semiotic pleasures. Therein, confined to her household, Consolata transforms the place from within, and these (magic) transformations connect her with one of the most interesting aspects of the historical witch, the healer figure who “belongs to the private sphere, from which the rite stems, even if it is collective. Initiation, ritual, healing, love itself have to do with individuals” (Kristeva and Clément, 2001: 176). In a “mixed” language difficult to follow, a meditative trance rather than an organized grammar, she manages to formulate her spiritual message to the half-frightened, half-amused listeners:

My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him. When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again. Twice she saves it. When her body sickens I care for it in every way flesh works. I hold it in my arms and between my legs. Clean it, rock it, enter it to keep it breath. After she is dead I can not get past that. My bones on hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones. No different from the man. My bones on his the only true thing. So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve. (Morrison, 1998: 263)

In consolidating all the “abominable” conditions of a neglected, dark and moist household, the cellar, where the wine is kept, becomes the central place of their meetings. It evokes the remoteness of the womb, as a windowless room, closed container or a sealed, her(m)etic space. As the locus of Consolata’s erotic desires from the past, it is a secret crossroads, a place of coming together of the broken, depressive, hysterical and the inarticulate, sublime, semiotic.

First they had to scrub the cellar floor until its stones were as clean as rocks on a shore. Then they ringed the place with candles. Consolata told each to undress and lie down. In flattering light under Consolata’s

soft vision they did as they were told. How should we lie? However you feel... When each found a position she could tolerate on the cold, uncompromising floor, Consolata walked around her and painted the body's silhouette. Once the outlines were complete, each was instructed to remain there. Unspeaking. Naked in candlelight. (Morrison, 1998: 263)

The "predisposition for the sacred," as referred to by Clément, "better accommodates itself to naked rebellion, insurrectional heroism, the enthusiasm of the moment, in short, to the gaps in social time" (Kristeva and Clément, 2001: 55) which tie in with the carnivalesque structure as a cultural practice of suspending the order. However, this suspension, associated with momentary "gaps in social time," has a different resonance in Morrison's text since it refuses to be momentary, casual or orgasmic, and functions as a newly established order for the secret/sacred practices in the cellar. It also challenges the association of carnival with the overexcited body of a hysteric, since the sacred experience comes as a result of a cure (treatment) of the young women's pathological symptoms. Their desires, pains and sorrows intermingle with their newly established spiritual household, and the reversed "system of classification" (Kristeva and Clément, 2001: 92) in which all are taken care of now. "In loud dreaming, monologue is no different from a shriek; accusations directed to the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love. So, exhausted and enraged, they rise and go to their beds vowing never to submit to that again but knowing full well they will. And they do" (Morrison, 1998: 264). The carnivalesque carelessness of their orgasmic freedom is gone, but rather than returning to the phallogocentric order, the household prevails as a politically and strategically independent structure in which

the women sleep, wake and sleep again with images of parrots, crystal seashells and a singing woman who never spoke. At four in the morning they wake to prepare for the day. One mixes dough while another lights the stove. Others gather vegetables for the noon meal, then set out the breakfast things. The bread, kneaded into mounds, is placed in baking tins to rise. (Morrison, 1998: 285)

As initiated by Consolata, household tasks and desire intermingle, connect and disconnect, in a trance, becoming a spiritual practice of renewal, a sub-culture within the symbolic system of restrictions. Evoking images of the culturally abject and "an implacable enemy of the symbolic order" (Kristeva, 1982: 70), Consolata interferes with patriarchal discourse, as does Cixous' "newly born woman" who "finds ways out—*sorties*":

Like many other women's, her imaginative journeys across the frontier of prohibition are utopian, voyages out into a no place that must

be a no man's and no woman's land... the newborn woman, transcending the heresies of history and the history of hysteria, must fly/ flee into a new heaven and a new earth of her own invention. (Clément and Cixous, 1986: xiv)

After all, it is the physical absence of *her* mother (her unknown identity), which contributes to the dream of presence (“a new earth of her own invention”), a dream that in fact should be taken literally, since its fulfillment lies within the “newly established” limits of culture.

Female desire, intensified by the spiritual and bodily transformation of the convent's women, transcends here the stereotypes of race, but not necessarily gender. As in Morrison's earlier work (“Recitatif”), the reader is never given any final opportunity to distinguish the women's skin color: the racial identifications are ambiguous, exchangeable, releasing “the operations of race in the feminine” from obligatory references to skin color and its subsequent cultural connotations (Abel, Christian and Moglen, 1997: 102). By “replacing the conventional signifiers of (racial) difference” and “by substituting for the racialized body a series of disaggregated cultural parts,” Morrison “exposes the unarticulated (racial) codes that operate at the boundaries of consciousness” (Abel, Christian and Moglen, 1997: 102).

They shoot white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out there. They are seventeen miles from a town which has ninety miles between it and any other. Hiding places will be plentiful in the Convent, but there is time and the day has just begun. (Morrison, 1998: 3)

Apart from Consolata's stated Indian origin, the indications as to which of the women is the white one, or what is the skin color of the others, are few and confusing, almost absent. Their absence directly challenges the Black community's obsession with their racial purity that is no longer “the sign . . . they had taken for granted” but “a stain” (Morrison, 1998: 194), a historical repetition but “in reverse.” The convent's “impurity” is projected both as female and as not (entirely) black; it reopens and pollutes their grandfathers' wounds. The situation on the outside of the convent (in Ruby) is entirely controlled by a racially “pure” phallic structure, however, it is also threatened by the impure elements emanating from the “inside.” As in Barbara Creed's analysis of the horror set-up, “the house that offered a solace ultimately becomes a trap, the place where the monster is destroyed and/or the victim murdered” (1993: 56). For the nine men on the mission, the place constitutes the ultimate danger of annihilation, of being engulfed by the witch's monstrous and invulnerable womb. Its invulnerability “works to license violence against her, violence tinged with the terror of the maternal. Her hard body is a pre-text for violence against her invasive magical power, itself an extension of her body” (Purkiss, 1996:

127). Inevitably, the subversive power of the convent has to be challenged by the centralized power of Ruby; it has to be believed to be wrong in order to be destroyed. "I know they got powers. Question is whose power is stronger... They don't need men and they don't need God. Can't say they haven't been warned" (Morrison, 1998: 276). The impenetrable "inside" threatens life, and must therefore be "radically excluded" (Kristeva, 1982: 2). In the brutal murder performed on the convent's women, the men thus expel their anxieties to the margin of the community, and project a deeply familiar contradiction to everything they believe they stand for. The convent in the end becomes for them a place of disconnection, of separation from anxiety, impenetrability, and vulnerability: from everything that mother comes as a reminder of.

Morrison's *Paradise* clearly deconstructs the traditional concept of household as a "stable" phallogocentric structure and of the mother as a "traditional" housewife into political sites of cultural transgression. The subversive household, a condition that gradually supplements the absence of the phallogocentric discourse, has the transitory and indefinite character of a trance that is healing. The ambiguous pleasures of paradise, which open for the convent's women after their death (as they become transcendental bodies), emerge from the fertile, reproductive spaces of the convent's garden. This paradise offers another transgression of symbolic restrictions in the form of the differently cultured (semiotic) realm of unspeaking Piedade, a transgression that calls to mind the Kristevan "sacred body of a woman, sacred because at the crossroads of love" (Kristeva and Clément, 2001: 105). The garden serves as a locus of the specifically female sacred trance that becomes "order," in direct contrast with the (dis/ordered) brutality of the men who leave the mission unconvinced of the results they have accomplished. Thus, as Morrison suggests, it is a spiritual path that comes from the healing maternal powers rather than institutionally sanctioned religious structure, that serves as a strategy for the women to cope with the phallogocentric culture.

However, as a space of refuge, Morrison's posthumous paradise fails to protect women within culture. In transgressing into a semiotic pleasure beyond culture (and in fact beyond the body), the paradise "simply" offers a return to the protective womb. As such it runs the risk of a "libidinal economy" appearing less as "a locus of cultural subversion" than as "a futile gesture" (Butler, 1990: 78-80), unable to solve the problem within the culture and its laws. The political power of the cellar/womb is left unarticulated, enclosed with other secrets kept behind the walls of the convent. It remains her(m)etic, sealed with a scar on the body, like the dark cellar/womb whose meaning they cannot decipher. It is in this sense, perhaps, that Morrison's sacred space (as a source of subversion) becomes politically problematic, since, to quote Judith Butler, it "cannot be maintained within the terms of culture" (1990: 80). Simultaneously, however, the after-life paradise originates from and maintains its firm connection with/in the convent, where the women, just before being shot, undergo their powerful spiritual metamorphosis. This form of connection, misunder-

stood or never taken into account by the self-victimized oppressors from Ruby, is posited by Morrison as an attempt to formulate the space of libidinal character within culture: the space of negotiation between spoken and unspoken territories of culture that so far has not been acknowledged as negotiable, and therefore neither strategic nor political.

¹Foucault, according to Nancy Armstrong, “ignores the domestic domain in the development of the institutional culture,” and “neglects to theorize the power of the modern household as a cultural prototype.” Moreover, he “opens the category for political power extending the cultural discipline only so far as institutions came to be dominated by man (one could say, historically, because these institutions were dominated by male representatives).” To correct Foucault’s category, Armstrong’s article, “Some Call it Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity,” emphasizes the “continuities between home and state” (1997: 918).

²In Douglas’s *Purity and Danger*, pollution (or uncleanness) occurs as disorder, and the process of its elimination is understood as “a positive effort to organize the environment.” Pollution is associated with matter that is *out of place*, and “must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained” (1969, 40). In consequence, a “polluting person is always in the wrong... developed some wrong condition or ...crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger” (1969, 113).

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