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“THAT CONfusion OF WHO IS WHO, Flesh and Flesh”: Mothers, Daughters, and the Body in Postwar and Contemporary American Literature

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DEDICATION

For my mother, Patricia Faltermann Blevins, who taught me how to read and write and think critically, and who started but never finished a PhD. Using the knowledge and skills she gave me, I finished for us both.
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ABSTRACT

In “That confusion of who is who, flesh and flesh”: Mothers, Daughters, and the Body in Postwar and Contemporary American Literature, I investigate how the body limits, disrupts, ruptures, or recuperates the mother/daughter relationship in postwar and contemporary texts by twentieth-century US women writers. These narratives portray the construction of female subjectivity when the feminine self seems insufficiently distinct from the mother (or daughter). In four chapters arranged chronologically by decade, I examine texts by Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, Sylvia Plath, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, and Edwidge Danticat. On the one hand, mothers in these texts often enforce a social order that defines the body as excessive, abject, and in need of regulation. On the other hand, they themselves frequently embody that excess, becoming the engulfing and off-putting bodies that daughters want to reject. The women writers in my study draw upon this ambivalence to cultivate a feminist poetics of the body that sees abjection as the shared state of mothers and daughters. The starting point of abject embodiment ultimately offers an opportunity for women to reject the myth of mind-body dualism and to value the intersubjective and corporeal rather than patriarchal individualism. As Darieck Scott writes in his important study of abjection and blackness, “abjection produces a ‘break’ in gender and sexuality—and…therefore produces an opportunity for different configurations of gender and sexuality.” Bringing together the insights of fat studies, critical race studies, and corporeal feminism, this project proposes that these “different configurations” include the
possibility of new relationships between mothers and daughters, escaping the painful
dyad of self-hatred and maternal surveillance.
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INTRODUCTION

When I was going through some of my mother’s things a couple of years after she died, I found a letter dated July 1, 1957 that my grandmother sent her when she was away at summer camp. Granny ends the letter with an expression of love and a cruel instruction: “today I was thinking about you all day, yesterday too, sweetiepie, see you soon and try not to get any fatter. Love big hugs XXXX Mommy.” My mother was eight years old.

Granny lived with us as I was growing up, which meant that I had a front row seat to her volatile and dysfunctional relationship with my mother. Unsurprisingly, that same volatility and dysfunction came to characterize my relationship with my mother because, as they say, shit rolls downhill.

Now that the two women who raised me and taught me to hate my body are gone, I find myself obsessed with that shit—that is, with the leaky, unpredictable, and, at times, uncontainable abjection of the feminine body, and the harmful lessons regarding female corporeality that are often passed down through matrilineages. In my family, those lessons primarily focused on body size. The dictate to “try not to get any fatter” was ever present, and the state of my body was a constant source of concern for both of the adult women in my home. My mother told me that while it was important for me to be smart, it was far more important for me to be skinny and pretty; when I pointed out that she was not thin, she replied, “Well, I already have a husband.” Her message was clear: as a woman, my physical appearance would determine my value in society, and any hope for
a heteronormative future and social mobility was contingent on corraling and suppressing my fat female body.

Based on many of the literary texts in this study (and based on my four decades of living in a female body), I have to admit that Granny and my mother were not necessarily wrong. As Susan Bordo, Naomi Wolf, Sabrina Strings, Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, and many others have observed, in Western patriarchal culture, a woman’s worth (on the job market, on the marriage market, in everyday interactions with strangers) is often measured by her ability to comply with hegemonic beauty ideals, which establish thinness and whiteness as the pinnacle of attractiveness and femininity.\(^1\) Moreover, as Monica Carol Miller, Susie Orbach, and Kim Chernin note, mothers are expected to prepare their daughters to navigate the misogynistic gauntlet of public opinion.\(^2\) Hence, a mother’s worth is at least partially determined by her daughter’s perceived worth, which is overwhelmingly determined by her body. Therefore, I understand that my grandmother and mother’s obsession with my body was both culturally mandated and socially enforced. Perhaps, in some perverse way, it was even an act of love.

In “That confusion of who is who, flesh and flesh”: Mothers, Daughters, and the Body in Postwar and Contemporary American Literature, I investigate how the body limits, disrupts, ruptures, or recuperates the mother/daughter relationship in postwar and contemporary texts by twentieth-century US women writers. These narratives portray the construction of female subjectivity when the feminine self seems insufficiently distinct from the mother (or daughter). On the one hand, mothers in these texts often enforce a social order that defines the body as excessive, abject, and in need of regulation. On the other hand, they themselves frequently embody that excess, becoming the engulfing and
off-putting bodies that daughters want to reject. The women writers in my study draw
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gender and sexuality—and…therefore produces an opportunity for different
configurations of gender and sexuality.” 3 Bringing together the insights of fat studies,
critical race studies, and corporeal feminism, this project proposes that these “different
configurations” include the possibility of new relationships between mothers and
daughters, escaping the painful dyad of self-hatred and maternal surveillance.

Perhaps nowhere is the significance of the body between two women more
complex, more charged, or more potentially tragic than in the mother/daughter
relationship. As Adrienne Rich writes, “That earliest enwrapment of one female body
with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected, felt as choking possessiveness, as
rejection, trap, or taboo; but it is, at the beginning, the whole world.” 4 In modern fiction,
women writers dramatize this tension. On the one hand, the mother/daughter relationship
still retains elements of this infantile state, grounded in the body. Female flesh feels
simultaneously sensuous and inescapable. On the other, the mother is the educator and
enforcer, teaching her daughter to be dissatisfied with her own body. In Sula, for
instance, Helene urges Nel to “pull her nose” so it does not look so “broad” and “flat,”
thereby instilling white beauty standards in her black daughter. 5 Because the mother is
both the model of feminine fleshliness and the source of social discipline, the daughter experiences overwhelming ambivalence, both about her mother and about her own body.

Fat and blackness are two of the focal points in my study because, much like the paradoxical mother/daughter relationship, which embodies both intimacy and discipline, these abject categories have been understood both as a sign of femininity and as a mechanism of ungendering. As Richard Dyer argues in White, “the figure of the woman as angel, enlightened and enlightening” relies upon a visual iconography of lightness—encompassing thinness, transcendence, and luminousness. The writers in my study ironize this desire to take flight and instead steep their characters in the corporeal, reclaiming categories like fatness, blackness, and dirtiness.

Starting from the Kristevan concept of abjection, I use a psychoanalytical frame to investigate the intersubjective relationship between mothers and daughters who create one another through their fantasies, fears, and desires for the other person. I also find that these fictions anticipate the insights of corporeal feminism, fat studies, and black feminism—theoretical approaches which propose that the flesh itself becomes a medium of productive excess. Through this combination of psychoanalysis and material feminisms, I examine both the construction of subjectivity through fantasy and narration as well as the role of the material body in that process—and indeed, in its unraveling.

In four dual author chapters arranged chronologically by decade, I trace the ways in which fluctuating societal beliefs regarding the female body have been reflected in literary representations of the mother/daughter relationship, and consider how emerging trends in literary form have furthered those representations. I have chosen the postwar and contemporary periods (specifically, the 1940s to 1990s) for historical, literary, and
personal reasons. Over the course of those fifty years, the roles and expectations for women—as mothers/reproductive bodies, sexualized/aestheticized objects, consumers, and citizens—changed dramatically and rapidly. In terms of literary developments, the era of the 1940s to the 1990s encompasses such trends as the modernist short story, confessional poetry, the postmodern novel, and postcolonial literature. My project explores how women writers employ these various genres to portray complicated and dynamic relationships between mothers and daughters, because, in many instances, their formal choices help them effectively render the fluid, mercurial nature of both the mother/daughter relationship and subjectivity itself.

Finally, this historical period has personal significance for me, as it spans the time frame during which the women in my matrilineage raised their daughters. My mother was born in 1948, and I was born in 1978; thus, the mother/daughter relationships in my own family paralleled the literary mothers and daughters that comprise this study. The process of researching and writing this dissertation has helped me to consider how the sociocultural forces working on my grandmother and mother shaped our relationships. When I encounter, for instance, the resentment I felt towards my mother’s controlling nature reflected in Sylvia Plath’s violent rejection of the maternal figure in her poem “Medusa,” or the same power struggle over body size that existed between my mother and grandmother mirrored in Joan and Frances’s conflict in Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, I can see that we were not unique. As I will discuss, for some of the authors in this dissertation, complex mother/daughter issues in their own lives inspired the female characters that appear in their fiction. Discovering such parallels and researching the patriarchal machinations behind much of the animus between mothers and daughters in
the mid to late twentieth century have encouraged me to redistribute the blame for the toxic practices in my own matrilineage. In other words, like the literary mothers in this study, Granny and my mother were oppressed and compelled by the same internal conditioning and external pressures that have sought to influence and entrap me, and they believed it was their job to teach me how to succeed within the system rather than to inspire me to dismantle it.

In addition to positioning my primary texts historically and considering how form contributes to their portrayal of mother/daughter relationships, I examine the texts through the lens of feminist psychoanalysis, particularly through the work of Julia Kristeva. In her essay “The Semiotic and the Symbolic” in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva identifies two (inseparable) modes of the signifying process, or the process by which subjects acquire language: the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic is the stage prior to language, prior to signification, when an infant feels inseparable from its mother, which lasts from our time in the womb until about six months of age. Kristeva calls the drives and energy we experience in this stage the “chora,” which is a rhythmic, pulsating form of communication associated with the maternal that is typically repressed when a subject enters the symbolic order. She writes, “the chora, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. Our discourse – all discourse – moves with and against the chora in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it.” In other words, the chora is experienced as sheer fluidity, timelessness, and connectedness; during this stage, the subject cannot perceive of herself as separate from her mother. Once the subject transitions into the realm of the symbolic, she enters into the world of language, which is ruled by the law of
the Father. Whereas in the stage of the semiotic chora the subject is pure materiality and experiences a oneness with her surroundings, in the symbolic stage the subject perceives herself as separate from everything and everyone around her, and can therefore enter into society. For some of the primary texts I explore in my dissertation (specifically, works by Gwendolyn Brooks, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison, Edwidge Danticat, and Jamaica Kincaid), this concept of a pre-lingual, pre-Oedipal form of communication between a mother and child during the time they share the same body illuminates the ways in which some mothers and daughters continue to feel connected to and/or haunted by this originary relationship.

The oceanic connectedness of the semiotic chora stage of development precedes that of the primal, repulsive abject, another Kristevan concept that figures prominently in my project. In “Approaching Abjection” from Powers of Horror, Kristeva writes, “Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of preobjectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be.” This “immemorial violence” is the separation of the infant from the mother, first physically transitioning from one body to two, and then psychically separating when the child begins to apprehend a separation between herself and the maternal figure, a period occurring sometime between four and eight months of age that Kristeva associates with the abject. Since the indistinct boundary between mother and infant is the primal experience of both fascination and horror, the abject is closely associated with the maternal body. Additionally, the abject is that which threatens to break down meaning through a loss of the distinction between self and other, or subject and object. Examples of such forces include vomit, feces, bodily fluids, the sight of a corpse, etc. Kristeva
explains, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what
disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-
between, the ambiguous, the composite.” In other words, the abject is comprised of the
revolting (yet necessary) features of physicality—the fluids, the seepage, the general
messiness of being alive—aspects of the operations of the body that we need, but reject.
We reject and expulse the abject, yet it is us, too; we establish our sense of self through
our primal repression of the abject, yet it always haunts us, reminding us of death and
threatening to dismantle the division between subject and object. In essence, the mother’s
body and the abject (and the abjection of the mother’s body) are what we reject and
repress in order to form our subjectivity. In my study, I trace how maternal abjection
influences both mother/daughter relationships and women’s attempts at self-definition.
Also, I propose that in certain texts (e.g., Flannery O’Connor’s short stories, Margaret
Atwood’s Lady Oracle, and Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye), for some mothers, their
daughters’ bodies seem to possess a level of abjection (which I have termed “daughter
abjection”) tantamount to maternal abjection, adding yet another barrier to the
mother/daughter connection.

Most frequently, the daughters’ bodies are considered abject when they fail to
conform to the hegemonic expectations for feminine beauty that the mothers attempt to
enforce; in particular, for white mothers, daughter abjection often takes the form of fat,
while for black mothers it tends to be the result of internalized racist beliefs regarding
appearance. In my dissertation, I explore the concept of fat as a form of abjection by
building on Le’a Kent’s essay “Fighting Abjection” from Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness
and Transgression. Kent writes, “in the public sphere, fat bodies, and fat women’s bodies
in particular, are represented as a kind of abject: that which must be expelled to make all other bodily representations and functions, even life itself, possible.” Therefore, if fatness is abject, then it becomes one of the forces against which subjectivity is formed and delimited. Kent argues, “Within mainstream representations of the body, the fat body functions as the abject: it takes up the burden of representing the horror of the body itself for the culture at large.” In other words, the fat body becomes the Every Body; demonizing and pathologizing the abject fat body helps society-at-large define itself as the “not-her” and project its general distaste for physicality onto the fat body, thereby establishing a hyper-visible delineation between self and other, subject and object. I extend Kent’s claims regarding the abjection of fat bodies by theorizing their ramifications for subject formation within the mother/daughter relationship, specifically in texts by Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, Sylvia Plath, and Margaret Atwood.

Whereas the abjection of white female bodies in my primary texts is usually due to fat, physical disability, or maternity, the abjection of black female bodies is often ascribed to race. In her discussion of the “captive body” in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense J. Spillers draws a distinction between “flesh” and “body,” arguing that the flesh of the captive black body exists outside of ideology, and is denied subjecthood. Since “the procedures for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification,” and since, as Spillers establishes, the cultural imaginary of the United States developed its “American grammar” through the legacy and effects of slavery, modern-day black bodies are, in many ways, still perceived as merely flesh. They are seen as objects, or they are not seen at all; as Vanessa D. Dickerson writes, “The black female body is unseen because it is socially constructed as
a body not worth the effort of seeing.” As Patricia Hill Collins, Camille Wilson Cooper, and others have noted, this objectification, or erasure, has profound implications for mothers of color, who have, until relatively recently, been left out of feminist theorizing about motherhood. Indeed, feminists like Luce Irigaray, Nancy Chodorow, and Julia Kristeva frequently essentialize women, speaking in terms of the universal feminine and failing to recognize the intersectional nature of oppression and marginalization. Significantly, Darieck Scott draws from Kristeva’s work to propose a theory of abjection specific to the black experience. In *Extravagant Abjection*, he posits that “the abjection in/of blackness endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive power,” because the black subject has “had to be inside” abjection and therefore can develop a fluid subjectivity outside the tropes of “identity, body, race, nation.” In my dissertation, I incorporate the work of black feminist and postcolonial theorists like Darieck Scott, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Hortense Spillers, Audre Lorde, Gayatri Spivak, Nira Yuval-Davis, and Pnina Werbner into my application of feminist psychoanalysis to texts by Brooks, Morrison, Danticat, and Kincaid as I draw conclusions regarding the significance of the black body in mother/daughter relationships.

My focus on bodily abjection dovetails with a consideration of the consequences of Cartesian dualism for women, as I examine how both the material and the discursive contribute to the subjectivity of the mothers and daughters in my primary texts. I draw from Elizabeth Grosz’s work, in particular the concept of “embodied subjectivity” or “psychical corporeality” that she presents in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Grosz strives to “displace the centrality of mind, the psyche, interior, or consciousness (and even the unconscious) in conceptions of the subject through a
reconfiguration of the body.”17 She argues that a feminist philosophical or theoretical approach to the body “must avoid the impasse posed by dichotomous accounts of the person which divide the subject into the mutually exclusive categories of mind and body.”18 Given the pervasive association of the female body (especially the maternal body) with abjection, it is crucial to consider how corporeality and the psyche contribute to the selfhood of the mothers and daughters in my study. According to Grosz, if we are able to resist the hierarchical relationship between mind and body that Cartesian dualism claims is inherent in subject formation, then the body becomes a liminal space capable of collapsing binaries: “instead of participating in – i.e., adhering to one side or the other of – a binary pair, these pairs can be more readily problematized by regarding the body as the threshold or borderline concept that hovers perilously and undecidably at the pivotal point of binary pairs.”19 The concept of the body as “threshold” becomes especially important when analyzing relationships between mothers and daughters, given Kristeva’s theories regarding the semiotic chora.

My research has been guided by the following questions: In mother/daughter relationships, how does the materiality of the body enter into constructions of the self? In what ways do cultural and societal beliefs about the female body (particularly regarding race and fatness) affect the mother/daughter relationship? How does the threat of maternal abjection drive mothers and daughters apart, and is that threat caused by bodily abjection, or by cultural fears and beliefs about motherhood? In their relationship, can the deleterious effects of the abjection of the daughter’s body rival or exceed that of the mother’s? And, conversely, can the abjection of the body somehow help to recuperate what is lost when one becomes two?
In chapter one, “‘I ain’t you’: Fat, Freedom, and the Female Body in Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty,” I analyze short stories from O’Connor’s *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (1965) and Welty’s *A Curtain of Green* (1941) and *The Golden Apples* (1949) to consider how two white, postwar, Southern women writers portray the intersection between the body and the mother/daughter relationship in the decades preceding the second wave of feminism. Specifically, in O’Connor’s “A Circle in the Fire,” “Good Country People,” and “Revelation,” and Welty’s “A Memory” and “June Recital,” I investigate how the development of subjectivity is influenced by both discursive and material limitations and fixations. Critics have tended to interpret these stories as tales of transcendence, reading the characters’ epiphanies through religious or spiritual lenses that privilege the journey of the mind over that of the body. By considering O’Connor’s and Welty’s stories through new methodological frameworks, namely fat studies and corporeal feminism, I propose that these stories trace the tensions between mothers and daughters as fundamental discomfort with embodiment itself. Moreover, excess flesh becomes the symbol of abject femininity, and the mothers’ aversion to this abjection ultimately limits the daughters’ psychosocial development and drives a wedge between the two women.

The second chapter, “The ‘Ballooning Body’ in Sylvia Plath and Gwendolyn Brooks,” pairs the poetry and autobiographical novels of Plath and Brooks, who both explore ambivalence toward motherhood and the desire for self-definition through the trope of the overwhelming and uncontrollable body. Specifically, I examine Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Brooks’s novel *Maud Martha* (1953), along with various poems by both authors. In their work, Plath and Brooks dramatize the process of becoming a
mother and admitting the abjection of the child-bearing body, in part as a way of navigating their overly close relationships with their own mothers. Indeed, bodily abjection shapes mother/daughter relationships in Plath’s and Brooks’s writing and lives and demonstrates their racialized strategies for negotiating these broached boundaries. Notably, their different approaches to pregnancy and childbirth, feminine abjection, and the process of daughters becoming mothers illustrate the ways in which the construction of whiteness as “invisible” and blackness as inescapable corporeality undergird notions of femininity and reproduction, as white Plath imagines transcending the body, while black Brooks turns abjection into a platform for activism.

In chapter three, “Daughter Abjection and Queer Temporality in Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison,” I show how the postmodern elements of early novels by Atwood and Morrison challenge static notions of identity through their portrayal of both maternal and daughter abjection. Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976) and Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) portray problematic mother/daughter relationships in which the abjection of the daughters’ bodies has a more debilitating effect on the relationship than does maternal abjection. While the mothers in these texts are frequently portrayed as monstrous and distant, the daughters are often depicted as disappointing and inadequate, particularly in their physical appearance. Consequently, in a reversal of the typical psychoanalytical developmental narrative in which maternal abjection compels the daughter to reject and separate from the mother, in *Lady Oracle* and *The Bluest Eye* it is the mothers who reject their daughters, in part because their daughters’ failure to comply with hegemonic, white supremacist beauty ideals threatens their own precarious position in patriarchal society. Utilizing a variety of postmodernist literary techniques, such as
temporal distortion, intertextuality, and multiple perspectives, Atwood and Morrison reveal the ways in which young women considered physically ugly or grotesque (Joan for her fatness, Pecola for her blackness) are precluded from a chrononormative experience of time, because their abjection renders them illegible to hegemonic progress-driven narratives. In my examination of these postmodern fictions of queer temporality, I propose that Joan’s and Pecola’s exclusion from chrononormativity may ultimately be read as liberating and subversive.

Finally, chapter four, “Carrying the Mother in Edwidge Danticat and Jamaica Kincaid,” explores the effects of colonialization and imperialism on mothers and daughters in Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). As products of their countries’ violent, colonial pasts, the women in these texts experience the difficulty of achieving and maintaining bodily and psychical autonomy when mothers and the motherland seek to suppress their identities and personal liberties. Sophie (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*) and Xuela (*The Autobiography of My Mother*) both attempt to reclaim and embrace the abjection of their feminine bodies and to establish a positive connection to their matrilineage while simultaneously asserting their own subjectivity, yet various obstacles—both material and psychological—threaten their success. In these two postcolonial novels, institutional misogyny and imperialist ideology infiltrate the relationships between mothers and daughters. Sophie and Xuela carry their mothers around like “living corpses,” unable to commit the symbolic matricide that Kristeva claims is necessary for individuation, in part because they never know their mothers as fully “living.” However, an exploration of a paradox at the heart of feminist object-relations theory reveals that such pathological conceptions of the mother-daughter
relationship are rooted in phallocentrism, and that for two subaltern women living in societies that seek to subjugate and silence them, “carrying” the mother may be a form of resistance, a necessary component of subject formation, and an act of love.

Unraveling the complexity of the connection between mother and daughter has been one of the driving forces of my life. As Adrienne Rich writes, “The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy.” No person or experience in my life has broken my heart as profoundly and deeply as my mother, and I imagine that she would say the same about me. This same heartache and estrangement pervades the pages of the texts by O’Connor, Welty, Plath, Brooks, Atwood, Morrison, Danticat, and Kincaid that I explore in this dissertation. Yet, there is love, too—a love so powerful that it transcends personal resentment, cultural oppression, and even death, for as Kincaid’s protagonist Xuela admits, “I had never known my mother and yet my love for her followed her into eternity.” To me, the mother/daughter dyad is simply the most fascinating relationship that exists, and this study focuses on the place where it all begins: the body.


8 Ibid., 236.


11 Ibid.


17 Ibid., vii.

18 Ibid., 21.
19 Ibid., 23.
22 Rich, 237.
CHAPTER 1

“I AIN’T YOU”: FAT, FREEDOM, AND THE FEMALE BODY IN

FLANNERY O’CONNOR AND EUDORA WELTY

In *Mystery and Manners* Flannery O’Connor writes, “The fiction writer has to realize that he can’t create compassion with compassion, or emotion with emotion, or thought with thought. He has to provide all these things with a body.” For O’Connor and Eudora Welty, the task of portraying female bodies presented a particular challenge since, as Sarah Gleeson-White has observed, “While the southern white woman’s value was invested in her body, she was at the same time *dis*-embodied.” The lingering effects of the antebellum South’s fetishization of the purity and sanctity of white women (and simultaneous disregard for their agency and ability) combined with the postwar emphasis on a slim, diminutive feminine form created an environment in which the white female body was both idolized and disenfranchised, valorized and dismissed. Notably, these paradoxical ideals have been reiterated by Southern women themselves, passed down through matrilineages. The women of O’Connor’s and Welty’s mid-century short stories embody this dichotomy. Hegemonic beauty ideals, particularly regarding body size, pervade the relationships between mothers and daughters in O’Connor’s and Welty’s fiction. Specifically, as mothers work to indoctrinate their daughters into patriarchal society, they place considerable emphasis on disciplining the younger woman’s body, onto which they oftentimes project their own insecurities and anxieties regarding
femininity and agency. In what follows, I trace the role of the body in mother/daughter relationships in short stories from O’Connor’s *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (1965) and Welty’s *A Curtain of Green* (1941) and *The Golden Apples* (1949) as I investigate how the development of subjectivity is influenced by both discursive and material limitations and fixations. Critics have tended to interpret these stories as tales of transcendence, reading the characters’ epiphanies through religious or spiritual lenses that privilege the journey of the mind over that of the body. By considering O’Connor’s and Welty’s stories through new methodological frameworks, namely fat studies and corporeal feminism, I propose that these stories trace the tensions between mothers and daughters as fundamental discomfort with embodiment itself. Moreover, excess flesh becomes the symbol of abject femininity, and the mothers’ aversion to this abjection ultimately limits the daughters’ psychosocial development and drives a wedge between the two women.

As historians and scholars such as Anne Goodwyn Jones, Susan V. Donaldson, and Louise Westling have noted, since the antebellum period, the bourgeois Southern white woman has symbolized religious piety, the fecundity of the land, and racial purity and superiority. Therefore, the surveillance and policing of her physical appearance has been a matter of regional identity and pride, as well as a way of enforcing racial and class boundaries. As “inheritors of an unworkable ideal,” Southern white women have been expected to convey fragility, grace, and purity through their physical appearance. In fact, even well into the twenty-first century the South is still obsessed with feminine beauty; in a 2014 study examining the effect of geographic region and gender on body image, women in the Southeast “report[ed] the poorest body image of any group,” findings that
the authors suggest “may be evidence of a long postulated idea that Southern culture, particularly as it relates to women, holds harsher standards of beauty and places more importance on appearance than other regions of the United States.”

This emphasis on the female form has long been an important strategy of subjugation and regulation by the patriarchy; as Susan Bordo points out, “Viewed historically, the discipline and normalization of the female body…has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control.” For a region so concerned with the presentation and purity of its white women, the Southern patriarchal society in which O’Connor and Welty were raised remained concerned with creating “docile bodies” (to borrow Foucault’s term) throughout the twentieth century. The postwar drive for domesticity only heightened this fixation on women’s appearance, a phenomenon which O’Connor and Welty—two women writers who were not considered conventionally attractive—convey in their fiction.

One of the primary methods through which these oppressive messages regarding women’s bodies are disseminated is a mother’s socialization of her daughter. As Monica Carol Miller points out in Being Ugly, Southern mothers are charged with raising young women who will “maintain and recreate the status quo,” which they accomplish by preparing their daughters to marry appropriately and perpetuate the white dominant culture. In other words, the Southern mother is expected to prepare her daughter for successful admittance into patriarchal society by teaching her how to be docile, subservient, and beautiful. Significantly, by the early to mid-twentieth century, feminine beauty had become synonymous with slimness. In what Peter Stearns terms the “The Misogynist Phase” of fat prejudice, mid-century America was overly fixated on the size
of female bodies, particularly those of young girls: “when overweight children were discussed from the 1920s until the 1970s, the focus was almost invariably on girls.”

Thus, part of a mother’s job became monitoring and containing the size of her daughter’s body.

This intense focus on the body has implications for both the daughter’s psychosocial development and for the relationship between a mother and daughter. Luce Irigaray posits that “the most ancient and most current relationship we know [is] the relationship to the mother’s body, to our body.” Since mothers and daughters first experience each other corporeally (and, according to theorists like Julia Kristeva, also communicate with each other through the body in the earliest stages of life), the body can become a highly charged emblem as a daughter grows up. In Of Woman Born, Adrienne Rich writes of the mother/daughter relationship, “That earliest enwrapment of one female body with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected, felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap, or taboo; but it is, at the beginning, the whole world.”

Once the daughter begins to individuate and separate from the mother (a process which Rich calls “the essential female tragedy”), the mother often sees the daughter as a reflection or double of herself. According to Rich, one consequence of this dynamic is that “[mothers] carry their own guilt and self-hatred over into their daughters’ experiences… [The mother] identifies intensely with her daughter, but through weakness, not through strength.” That is, due to her own unresolved issues, the mother fixates on her daughter’s weaknesses, because she sees them as a reflection of her own. This projection or doubling could be remnants of the “prolonged symbiosis and narcissistic overidentification” that characterize early relationships between mothers and daughters,
and which Nancy Chodorow suggests can continue to reemerge; according to Chodorow, the resurfacing of preoedipal mother/daughter issues during adolescence—which can include “maternal control of a daughter’s body”—serves as confirmation that aspects of the early childhood relationship between the two women persist. Consequently, the daughter rebels by rejecting her mother, which can involve crafting a selfhood that stands in direct opposition to the woman her mother wants her to become.

In what follows, I consider O’Connor’s and Welty’s fixation on fat females in their fiction and examine how those fat bodies intersect with mother/daughter relationships. In the first section, I apply a fat studies interpretation of Julia Kristeva’s theories regarding abjection to O’Connor’s characters Sally Virginia Cope and Joy-Hulga Hopewell to explore how their mothers’ disdain for their excessive bodies influences their psychosocial development. In section two, I explore how mother/daughter pairs in O’Connor’s “Revelation” and Welty’s “A Memory” facilitate epiphanies for the protagonists of both stories. Finally, in section three, I show how Miss Eckhart, a fat, German immigrant in Welty’s “June Recital,” becomes a sacrificial scapegoat so that a small, Southern community can reaffirm its traditional, patriarchal boundaries.

“Bright Fat Girls”: The Abject Body and the Stunted Self

Flannery O’Connor’s frequent fictional depictions of the mother/daughter relationship (which Louise Westling has referred to as “obsessive”) were unique for her time and region. Barbara Bennett notes that the mother figure is often “simply missing” in pre-1970 Southern fiction, making O’Connor the pre-1970 Southern author who deals most frequently with the mother/daughter relationship. This obsession has been
attributed to O’Connor’s intense and complicated relationship with her own mother, Regina, with whom she lived as an adult from the time she was diagnosed with lupus in 1952 until her death in 1964. As Westling has pointed out, in at least six of her thirty-one published stories, O’Connor depicts a widowed mother who takes care of her “large, physically marred girl” while also supervising a farm, and the daughter is usually portrayed as contrary and intellectual—circumstances which mirror Flannery and Regina’s life together.\(^{18}\) While, as Loxley F. Nichols observes, there are “no one-on-one parallels” between Flannery and Regina in any of the stories, both O’Connor’s fiction and her letters reveal her preoccupation with strong, overbearing mothers and their relationships with rebellious, disappointing daughters.\(^{19}\) Two such stories—“A Circle in the Fire” and “Good Country People” from *A Good Man is Hard to Find*—chart the trajectory of an unattractive (and noncompliant) girl’s fate in Southern culture. Sally Virginia and Joy-Hulga fail to perform femininity in the ways their mothers expect (and sometimes demand). In particular, the daughters’ bodies—depicted as fat, awkward, and aesthetically disappointing—become the site where the conflict between the mothers’ anxieties regarding gender performance and the daughters’ process of individuation most frequently collide.

Sally Virginia (whose name only appears once in the story—the rest of the time she is referred to as simply “the child”) spends most of “A Circle in the Fire” hovering in the background while her mother, Mrs. Cope, contends with three rude, mischievous boys who have taken up residence on their land. She is described as “a pale fat girl of twelve with a frowning squint and a large mouth full of silver bands.”\(^{20}\) Her mother only “turn[s] her attention to the child” when “one thing was finished and another about to begin,”
which indicates that mothering is an afterthought for Mrs. Cope (148). When, on one of these rare instances of attentiveness, she discovers her daughter dressed up as a man armed with two pistols, she gives her a “tragic look” and declares, “I look at you and I want to cry! Sometimes you look like you might belong to Mrs. Pritchard!” (148). Mrs. Pritchard, Mrs. Cope’s employee (ergo, of a lower class), is described as a “large woman” who is so fat she is able to fold her arms “on a shelf of a stomach” and is the physical “opposite” of Mrs. Cope, who is described as being “very small and trim” (127). Sally Virginia responds to her mother’s lamentations by telling her to “Leave me be. Just leave me be. I ain’t you,” and then goes off into the woods “as if she were stalking out an enemy” (148). As Westling observes, here Sally Virginia “deliberately speaks in poor-white dialect” as an act of defiance against her mother’s attempts to feminize her. In both her body and behavior, Sally Virginia rebels by aligning with her mother’s lower class employee. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow notes that oftentimes in the mother/daughter relationship girls “seem to become and experience themselves as the self of the mother’s fantasy.” Sally Virginia, “the child” whom Mrs. Cope seems to knowingly ignore, fails to serve as “her mother’s double and extension,” to reflect back the “self of [her] mother’s fantasy.” Sally Virginia’s selfhood is shaped by her rejection of her mother; as a “pale fat girl” who refuses to perform the kind of femininity that her mother expects, she strives to distance herself from her mother (i.e., “I ain’t you”), but her quest to define herself as the “not-her” will likely limit the development of her subjectivity, as it does for Joy in “Good Country People.”

Joy, a “large blonde girl who [has] an artificial leg,” is about twice the age of Sally Virginia (O’Connor calls Joy a “poor stout girl in her thirties”) (168, 171). Similar
to “A Circle in the Fire,” Joy is often referred to as simply “the girl” and has a contentious relationship with her mother, Mrs. Hopewell. Particular emphasis is placed on descriptions of Joy’s corporeality. She is described as “the large hulking Joy,” and “the big spectacled Joy-Hulga” (170, 172). Mrs. Hopewell appears to perceive her daughter’s physical disability, the loud noises she makes when she walks, and her body size as personal affronts. Joy has taken her quest to establish herself as the “not-her” to an extreme by earning a PhD in philosophy, dressing herself in mismatched, comical clothing, and even rejecting her birth name, legally changing her first name to Hulga, “purely on the basis of its ugly sound” (172). At times it is difficult to discern whether her life decisions have been motivated by sincere desire or whether they have been the result of an instinctual impulse to reject her mother, who views her daughter’s individuation as a process that has only served to alienate her: “It seemed to Mrs. Hopewell that every year [Joy] grew less like other people and more like herself—bloated, rude, and squint-eyed” (174). Significantly, Sally Virginia is also described as having a “frowning squint,” which seems to suggest that the daughters’ struggle for selfhood has affected their vision—perhaps a physical manifestation of their attempts to see themselves clearly and as separate from their mothers. For Joy-Hulga (or Sally Virginia), to grow “more like herself” means that she is growing less like her mother, a fact that creates conflict in both stories.

However, in growing less like their mothers, the daughters in O’Connor’s stories limit their own growth, and often end up simply developing into their mothers’ antithesis. Gretchen Dobrott Bernard concurs that the dysfunctionality in O’Connor’s fictional mother/daughter relationships “stunts any emotional growth, any possibility of daughter
or mother fully reaching maturity.” Both Sally Virginia and Joy-Hulga intentionally increase their ugliness through their mannerisms, attire, and attitudes, all to resist becoming their “mother’s double and extension.” To repel the boys who refuse to leave her mother’s property, Sally Virginia sticks her head out of her window and says, “‘Uggghhhrhh,’ in a loud voice, crossing her eyes and hanging her tongue out as far as possible as if she were going to vomit,” which is a far cry from the genteel manners and passive aggressiveness that Mrs. Cope employs in her dealings with the boys (140). Through her “ugly” sounding name, choosing to dress in “a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it,” and “stump[ing], with about twice the noise that was necessary” around the house with her artificial leg, Joy-Hulga presents herself as the opposite of the woman her mother wants her to be, which suggests that her life choices have been motivated purely by rebellion and spite (174, 183). Given Sally Virginia’s resistance to her mother’s attempts at gender conditioning, it seems plausible that she, in time, will do the same. Notably, in “A Circle in the Fire,” Sally Virginia is almost the same age as Joy-Hulga was when she lost her leg, which was “shot off in a hunting accident when Joy was ten” (171). As a result of this physical and emotional trauma, Joy-Hulga’s psychosocial development remains frozen in adolescence, and she becomes a perpetual angry teenager who resists independence (“Joy had made it plain that if it had not been for her condition, she would be far away from these red hills and good country people”) and perspective: “the large hulking Joy, whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face, would stare just a little to the side of her [mother], her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it” (174, 170).
For Sally Virginia and Joy-Hulga, resisting conscription into the Southern feminine ideal also compromises their personal growth.

Significantly, in 1956 (one year after *A Good Man is Hard to Find* was published), O’Connor wrote to a friend, “When I was twelve I made up my mind absolutely that I would not get any older”—a remark that is reminiscent of Joy-Hulga’s refusal to mature. While she attributes this decision to the fact that she was “a very ancient twelve” and found teenagers “repulsive,” one could argue that O’Connor ultimately (and ironically) got her wish by living with her mother until her death. The frustration that mothers like Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Hopewell exhibit towards their aesthetically disappointing daughters takes on new significance when examining the relationship between O’Connor and her own mother. In his extensive biography of O’Connor, Brad Gooch writes, “Regina’s devotion to her daughter often took the form of trying, unsuccessfully, to mold her into the perfect Southern-style little girl.” Similar to Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Hopewell, and the mothers of other O’Connor short stories, Regina ran a farm (Andalusia) after her husband died of lupus when Flannery was fifteen. As an intellectual, shy, socially awkward, “mousy looking young lady” who later walked with a limp (and eventually, on crutches), Flannery was not the marriageable Southern beauty that her mother had hoped for when raising her in Savannah society. Many visitors to Andalusia would later remark on the tension that they observed between Regina and Flannery during their stay; this tension is also apparent in Flannery’s collected letters, in which her comic portrayals of her mother sometimes seethe with restrained resentment.

Similar to her characters Sally Virginia and Joy-Hulga (and, as we will see later, Mary Grace in “Revelation”), O’Connor’s body and physical aesthetics became a point of
conflict between her and her mother. In an early autobiographical collection of stories from the mid-1930s called “My Relatives,” Flannery depicts Regina at the kitchen sink, barking orders: “‘Your father will be here any minute,’ her mother said, ‘and the table won’t be set. Hold your stomach in.’”

This indicates that Regina, an attractive, “hide-bound Southern lady, [who] always wore hat and gloves in public,” had already been instructing Flannery to be concerned with her figure by the time she was ten years old.

At age twelve, she wrote in her journal, “R. said I was clumsy,” which suggests that Regina’s criticism of Flannery’s physicality continued into adolescence. And by the time Flannery was an adult writer returning home from a visit with Robert and Sally Fitzgerald in 1952, Regina was still monitoring her daughter’s body: “As soon as she saw me my mamma said, ‘Oh you’ve gotten fat.’”

A letter to Elizabeth and Robert Lowell two years later seems to suggest that Flannery had internalized Regina’s aversion to fat: “I didn’t mean I was fat when I said I was disgustingly healthy. I’m not fat yet but I don’t have any room to grow. I just meant I don’t look very intelligent.”

Two years after that, in 1956, she writes to a friend, “it’s doubtful if there will ever again appear in my works anybody weighing over 92 pounds…Now I don’t love these fat women and I do love Mrs. May, Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Hopewell & Bailey’s mother”—all four of whom are thin characters.

In Being Ugly, Miller argues that writers like O’Connor depict ugly female characters who are not “suitable” for marriage and motherhood as a way of resisting and subverting patriarchal expectations for women. She clarifies that, in addition to describing physical appearance, the phrase “being ugly” has a “specifically southern definition,” which is “rude, rebellious, or other inappropriate behavior.”
“Though Flannery O’Connor claimed that southern literature is rife with freaks because only southerners were still able to recognize the freakish, I maintain that writers such as O’Connor created so many ugly women as their own way of ‘being ugly.’”

Significantly, so many of O’Connor’s “ugly women” (like Sally Virginia, Joy-Hulga, and Mary Grace) are “bright fat girls” whose lives and dispositions closely mirror their author’s, which seems to suggest that O’Connor may have viewed her own body as fat (or, at least, as large and unruly). While I agree with Miller’s assertion that O’Connor’s habit of creating ugly female characters was an act of rebellion against Southern gender norms, I also believe that the fact that so many of these characters are specifically fat (or, big and awkward) signals that Regina succeeded in conditioning her daughter to believe that “fat” was tantamount to “ugly,” that body size was an integral aspect of female beauty. So, while O’Connor’s frequent depictions of women who are not “properly feminine marriage material” do subvert hegemonic patriarchal expectations and thereby constitute a rebellion against the Southern status quo, the preponderance of corpulent female bodies (that she clearly meant to be perceived as “ugly”) in her stories suggests that her subversion of the status quo only went so far. Ultimately, O’Connor internalized the fat stigma that her mother—and the rest of mid-century American society—enforced.

In *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, Amy Erdman Farrell traces the intense, pervasive fat hatred in the US back to the Industrial Revolution and notes that “[f]atness in the United States ‘means’ excess of desire, of bodily urges not controlled, of immoral, lazy, and sinful habits,” and that “women…bear the particular brunt of our culture’s disgust with fatness.” By the time Regina was raising Flannery in
Georgia in the 1920s and 30s, “slenderness [had become] a sign of modern virtue.” Still today, fat is generally perceived to be both a physical disease and a moral failing. As aforementioned, a fear and hatred of fat is often passed down through matrilineages as mothers attempt to prepare their daughters to succeed within a patriarchal, fat-hating society. In her study “Fat Women: The Role of the Mother-Daughter Relationship Revisited,” sociologist Maya Maor interviewed a group of self-identified fat women to determine whether the mother/daughter relationship is a prominent factor in the development of a negative fat identity. She concluded that the mothers were central to the daughters’ development of fat hatred and self-loathing: “The relationship with interviewees’ mothers was a very prominent and central theme in participants’ recollections of how they were defined as ‘fat’, and how they came to understand that ‘fat’ has a negative meaning.” For most participants in the study, their first awareness of their “difference” caused by their fatness was prompted by “comments made by their mothers.” O’Connor portrays this dynamic in her fiction, possibly as a reflection of her experiences with her own mother. And since the female characters she intends to be perceived as “ugly” are so often also fat, it appears as if Regina’s conditioning succeeded.

When Sally Virginia and Joy-Hulga receive negative messages about their (fat) bodies from their mothers, this contributes to the formation of their selfhood—in particular, to the tension between their subjectivity and embodiment—because it renders their bodies abject. Julia Kristeva’s theory of the “abject” contends with our visceral reaction to forces that threaten to break down meaning through a loss of the distinction between self and other, or subject and object. Examples of such forces include vomit, feces, bodily fluids, the sight of a corpse, etc. Kristeva explains, “It is thus not lack of
cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What
does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the
composite.”  
That is, the abject is comprised of the revolting (yet necessary) features of
physicality—the fluids, the seepage, the general messiness of being alive—aspects of the
operations of the body that we need, but reject. We reject and expulse the abject, yet it is
us, too; we establish our sense of self through our primal repression of the abject, yet it always haunts us, reminding us of death and threatening to dismantle the division
between subject and object. In her essay “Fighting Abjection,” Le’a Kent posits that
fatness is a form of abjection.  
She writes, “in the public sphere, fat bodies, and fat
women’s bodies in particular, are represented as a kind of abject: that which must be
expelled to make all other bodily representations and functions, even life itself,
possible.”  
Therefore, if fatness is abject, then it becomes one of the forces against
which subjectivity is formed and delimited. The fat body becomes the Every Body;
demonizing and pathologizing the abject fat body helps society-at-large define itself as
the “not-her” and project its general (Cartesian-validated) distaste for physicality onto the
fat body, thereby establishing a hyper-visible delineation between self and other, subject
and object.

If the fat (female) body functions as a kind of abject, then this has profound
implications for the cathetic split that occurs between mother and daughter. The abject is
closely associated with the maternal body, since the indistinct boundary between mother
and infant is the primal experience of both fascination and horror. Kristeva writes, “The
abject confronts us…with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even
before ex-isting outside of her.”  
The mother’s body and the abject (and the abjection of
the mother’s body) are what we reject and repress in order to form our subjectivity. In other words, the process of individuation and creation of selfhood necessitates a repression of the abject and rejection of the mother; if the mother resents this split and thus aligns the daughter’s body with the abject by teaching the daughter that she is fat (and by teaching her daughter that fat is bad), and if the daughter internalizes this negative fat identity, she can never really escape the abjection of the body, and can therefore never establish clear boundaries of selfhood. As a fat woman living in a fat-hating society, abjection becomes who she is, not simply aspects of physicality to repress or avoid. And, if as Kristeva writes, the abject is the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite,” the daughter then hovers in a sort of developmental purgatory. She will likely become trapped in the same cycle of self-loathing and stunted emotional growth that produced her mother, even if she crafts herself into the antithesis of her mother, as Joy-Hulga does (and as Sally Virginia likely will).

This tension between the daughters’ subjectivity and embodiment is evident in the epiphanies they experience at the end of the stories. As Philip Stevick has noted, the epiphany, or “moment of self-awareness at the end of a fiction,” became a characteristic component of American stories after World War I, and Susan V. Donaldson has argued that the epiphany “serves as the central distinguishing mark of the modernist short story.”49 O’Connor referred to this trope as a moment of “grace”: “There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected.”50 Of course for O’Connor, a devout Catholic, the idea of the “presence of grace” has religious, or, at least, spiritual connotations, but for many other modernist writers, the epiphany became an opportunity for depicting a moment of transcendence
during “a period notably deficient in religious faith.” Therefore, in both its religious and literary sense, the epiphany tends to ratify the mind and soul over the body (and in most readings of O’Connor’s work that acknowledge the central role of the body in many of her characters’ epiphanies, the emphasis tends to be on the ways in which materiality and spirituality coalesce). However, I posit that we can view the moment of epiphany in these stories as an experience that plunges the characters further into the body.

For Sally Virginia in “A Circle in the Fire,” this moment occurs after the trespassing boys have set fire to her mother’s land; she tries to run to her mother, “but her legs were too heavy and she stood there, weighted down with some new unplaced misery that she had never felt before” (151). Significantly, Sally Virginia’s fall from innocence to experience is accompanied by a corporeal shift. Her “heavy” legs and the “weighted down” sensation she feels when she discovers her and her mother’s relative powerlessness in the face of misogyny signals that she is beginning to feel the weight of the patriarchy’s limitations on and expectations for women; additionally, this allusion to heaviness and weight may foreshadow that this “pale fat girl of twelve” will soon grow into a fat woman. When she reaches her mother, she stares “up at her face as if she had never seen it before. It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody” (152). Here, Sally Virginia apprehends how living as a woman in Southern society has marked her mother’s body; she has now been indoctrinated into the patriarchy, and on her mother’s face she sees a potential future self.

Joy-Hulga’s epiphany also involves a corporeal change and a harsh awakening. Due to the presence of her artificial leg, her abject fat body ventures into the realm of the
grotesque. Mary Russo defines the grotesque body as “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing.”52 The grotesque is associated with the uncanny, with that which is both familiar and unfamiliar; it represents a deviation from the norm—something (or someone) who is comically and/or disturbingly ugly or different.53 Because Joy-Hulga’s “hulking” body has the added anomaly of an amputated leg, she attracts the interest of a traveling bible salesman who has a fetish for grotesque female bodies and their prosthetics (“One time I got a woman’s glass eye,” he tells her [194]). Thinking, as her mother does, that he is just “good country people”—innocent, simple, and God-fearing, she agrees to accompany him on a picnic, where he seduces her, convinces her to remove her artificial leg, and then runs off with the leg.54 The man succeeds in persuading Joy-Hulga to remove her prosthetic leg—which “she was as sensitive about…as a peacock about his tail,” and which she sees as tantamount to her “soul”—by telling her that “it’s what makes you different. You ain’t like anybody else” (191). After he has gotten what he wants, however, he sneers, “I’m as good as you any day in the week,” and “you ain’t so smart” (193, 194). Through her failure to see the bible salesman’s true nature and thereby anticipate his sudden reversal, Joy-Hulga learns that she is not as smart and perceptive as she has always believed herself to be; ultimately, she is “like anybody else”—a lesson that Sally Virginia also learns when she sees her own newfound misery on her mother’s face, a misery that “could have belonged to anybody.” By retreating into her mind through a lifetime of intellectual pursuits, Joy-Hulga has tried to distance herself from her body; her epiphany at the end of “Good Country People” is the painful realization that, to patriarchal culture, her abject body is who she is, and her attempt to cultivate a selfhood that transcends or denies the body has, at least in this
instance, put her at a disadvantage: “Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at” (192).

Sally Virginia and Joy-Hulga—two “bright fat girls” who defy their mothers’ attempts at gender conditioning—demonstrate one way in which O’Connor’s fiction exceeds her own beliefs. By depicting fat as one of the qualities antithetical to feminine beauty, O’Connor seems to simply reify the fat prejudice of mid-century America. However, her stories may give us avenues of resistance that she might not have recognized herself. In her portrayals of complex mother/daughter relationships, neither the rebellious daughters nor the overbearing mothers emerge as clear antagonists. Rather, the antagonists in these stories are the hegemonic forces that compel these women to comply with arbitrary and oppressive beauty and behavioral standards. Examining these stories through the lenses of fat studies and corporeal feminism reveals that “A Circle in the Fire” and “Good Country People” illustrate the ways in which patriarchal expectations for women can infiltrate and sour relationships between mothers, daughters, and their bodies—a potentially recuperative (albeit likely unintentional) message from a woman writer who famously contended with a complex mother/daughter relationship of her own.

“A Hog and Me Both”: Epiphanic Mothers and Daughters

In O’Connor’s “Revelation” and Welty’s “A Memory,” fat bodies and mother/daughter conflicts facilitate epiphanies for the stories’ narrators. In the case of both stories, a great deal of critical attention has been paid to the “revelations” that Mrs. Turpin and the narrator of “A Memory” experience, but little has been ventured about the
secondary mother/daughter characters that serve as catalysts for those epiphanies. For both narrators, witnessing an uncanny exchange between a mother and daughter unearths fears that had previously been repressed.

“Revelation” grants readers access to the bigoted, self-righteous mind of Mrs. Ruby Turpin. The story is meditated through Mrs. Turpin’s myopic vision and dogmatic worldview, in which individuals are instantly hierarchized based on race, perceived socio-economic class, and sartorial proclivities. “Revelation” begins as Mrs. Turpin and her husband Claud enter a “very small” doctor’s office waiting room, which “Mrs. Turpin, who was very large, made…look even smaller by her presence” (191). When she squeezes herself into a chair “which held her tight as a corset” and expresses a desire to “reduce,” a “stylish lady” (also sometimes referred to as “the pleasant lady”) sitting across from her assures her, “Oh, you aren’t fat”—the pointed emphasis on “you” seeming to imply that her own daughter sitting next to her, “a fat girl of eighteen or nineteen,” is fat (193). As Mrs. Turpin appraises the daughter’s scowling face that is “blue with acne,” she reflects that she “herself was fat but she had always had good skin, and, though she was forty-seven years old, there was not a wrinkle in her face except around her eyes from laughing too much” (194). Similar to Ruby Hill in O’Connor’s “A Stroke of Good Fortune,” Ruby Turpin prides herself on her youthful appearance, which has been made possible by both her corpulent frame and avoidance of motherhood.

As Mrs. Turpin converses with the “stylish/pleasant lady” (the only other occupant of the waiting room whom she deems worthy of her attention, besides her own husband), the “big fat girl with her face all broke out,” Mary Grace, grows increasingly agitated and rancorous (212). Like Joy-Hulga in “Good Country People,” Mary Grace is
a physically-marred intellectual surrounded by nitwits; a college student home on a break from school, she attempts to read her *Human Development* textbook in silence, but her mother’s and Mrs. Turpin’s classist, racist, passive-aggressive, and cliché remarks ignite in her an epic fury. She begins to express this rage through steady glares at Mrs. Turpin: “the ugly girl’s eyes were fixed on Mrs. Turpin as if she had some very special reason for disliking her” (197). Finally, when her anger reaches its apex, she hurls *Human Development* at Mrs. Turpin’s head right before charging and sinking her fingers “like clamps into the soft flesh of [Mrs. Turpin’s] neck” (206). In the chaos that ensues, Mary Grace, restrained by her mother and a nurse, delivers one of her only two lines in the entire story to Mrs. Turpin: “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog” (207). After Mary Grace is sedated and taken away in an ambulance with her mother, the Turpins return to their farm, where Mrs. Turpin attempts to process the experience and reconcile Mary Grace’s harsh pronouncement with her own narcissistic Christian cosmology.

Critical responses to “Revelation” tend to focus on Ruby Turpin’s spiritual journey, which culminates in a vision of “whole companies of white-trash…bands of black niggers…and battalions of freaks and lunatics”—the very demographic groups she derides throughout the story—“rumbling toward heaven” ahead of her, which she experiences as she cleans out the hog pen on her farm.57 Certainly, Mrs. Turpin’s vision serves as the climax of the story. However, this “most powerful of O’Connor’s revelations” is only made possible by Mrs. Turpin’s brush with a volatile mother/daughter relationship into which she unknowingly intrudes in a doctor’s office
waiting room. Additionally, another smaller climax and epiphany (which precede Mrs. Turpin’s) cause Mary Grace and her mother to reconnect at an unlikely moment.

From the stylish lady’s first passive aggressive comment about her daughter’s weight to the moment that the two ride off together in an ambulance, the tension in the mother/daughter pair is palpable. The reassuring comments that the stylish lady makes to Mrs. Turpin regarding her “good disposition” double as subtle jabs at her “scowling” daughter seated next to her: “I don’t think it makes a bit of difference what size you are. You just can’t beat a good disposition” (193). Their contrasting footwear conveys the mother’s fastidiousness about appearance and Mary Grace’s disdain for it: “The well-dressed lady had on red and grey suede shoes to match her dress….The ugly girl had on Girl Scout shoes and heavy socks” (194). Mary Grace, like Joy-Hulga, defies her mother through her attire. However, even though she goes to great lengths to distance herself from her mother aesthetically and intellectually, it remains obvious to an outside observer that the two belong to each other: “She was obviously the lady’s daughter because, although they didn’t look anything alike as to disposition, they both had the same shape of face and the same blue eyes. On the lady they sparkled pleasantly but in the girl’s seared face they appeared alternatively to smolder and to blaze” (196). Dumas and Wilson interpret this intense “smoldering” gaze as evidence that Mary Grace is “an embodiment of spiritual presence” and can offer Mrs. Turpin “enlightenment.” Within the context of the mother/daughter dyad, however, this gaze likely has little to do with Mrs. Turpin.

Seated right next to each other yet psychically miles apart, Mary Grace and her mother use Mrs. Turpin as an intermediary for their problems with each other. The great
extremes to which Mary Grace goes to disassociate from her mother (i.e., the unattractive attire, her intentionally “ugly” disposition, and her attendance at a Northern liberal arts college) signal her desire to individuate and separate from her mother. This process has clearly been difficult for the mother, who vents her frustration through passive aggressive comments to Mrs. Turpin. After Mary Grace makes a “loud ugly noise through her teeth,” “[h]er mother’s mouth grew thin and tight” before she begins her lament to Mrs. Turpin: “‘I think the worst thing in the world,’ she said, ‘is an ungrateful person…. I know a girl…who can never say a kind word to anyone, who never smiles, who just criticizes and complains all day long’” (205). Ironically, of course, here it is the mother herself who criticizes and complains about Mary Grace. It is noteworthy that the mother’s diatribe is preceded by Mary Grace’s “loud ugly noise through her teeth” and her own mouth growing “thin and tight”; the two seem to want to communicate their frustrations openly with each other, but the words that could possibly connect them cannot make it past their lips. Interestingly, this is the final exchange between the mother and daughter before Mary Grace hurls her book at Mrs. Turpin’s head. Critics have typically read the book tossing as motivated by Mary Grace’s anger at Mrs. Turpin for proclaiming “Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!” because God didn’t make her white-trash or black, but I propose that this random violent act is actually a response to the mother’s passive aggressive comments that immediately precede Mrs. Turpin’s joyful outburst. Throughout the story, Mary Grace projects her resentment of her mother and her own self-loathing onto Mrs. Turpin, who serves as a double of both her mother and herself. In Mrs. Turpin’s fat frame, Mary Grace sees a future self reflected back to her; Mrs. Turpin’s age and aggressively positive disposition also render her a stand-in for Mary
Grace’s mother. This helps explain why “[t]here was no doubt in [Mrs. Turpin’s] mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition” (207). To Mary Grace, Mrs. Turpin embodies the hypocrisy of her mother, the bigotry of the region she has tried to escape, and her own fat, abject body. Mary Grace hurls her book at Mrs. Turpin because she cannot throw it at her mother, the South, or herself.

After the attack, the energy between Mary Grace and her mother changes. The doctor enters the waiting room and gives Mary Grace a shot (presumably a sedative), after which her eyes “seemed a much lighter blue than before, as if a door that had been tightly closed behind them was now open to admit air and light” (207). The protective shield that Mary Grace erected as a psychic barricade to her mother has been lowered through the cathartic release of anger and the swift administration of pharmaceuticals. The mother sits on the floor, “her lips pressed together, holding Mary Grace’s hand in her lap. The girl’s fingers were gripped like a baby’s around her thumb” (208). Again, the mother’s tightened lips hold back her words. Mary Grace’s fingers “gripped like a baby’s” around her mother’s thumb suggest that she has regressed to an infantile state following the outburst. Chodorow posits, “A girl alternates between total rejection of a mother who represents infantile dependence and attachment to her, between identification with anyone other than her mother and feeling herself her mother’s double and extension.”61 This vacillation between rejection and attachment, projection and symbiosis is evident in the drama that plays out between mother and daughter in the waiting room. The great lengths to which Mary Grace goes to physically present herself as distinct from her mother and to publicly disavow the sentiments expressed in her mother and Mrs.
Turpin’s conversation are thrown into sharp contrast by her sudden childlike dependence on her mother. The fact that their connection and reconciliation is expressed bodily rather than through language is notable, for it is reminiscent of Kristeva’s concept of the chora, the pre-linguistic communication between a mother and her infant prior to the child’s acquisition of language. Indeed, in this brief period of connection following Mary Grace’s outburst, neither mother nor daughter seems capable of communicating through language: “Until the ambulance came, the only sounds in the room were the tremulous moans of the girl’s mother, who continued to sit on the floor” (208). The mother’s moaning conveys the agony of the thetic split, of the daughter’s loss to the mother. The two women are reconnected through their shared pain and dependence on each other. Therefore, while Mrs. Turpin’s encounter with Mary Grace serves as the catalyst for a spiritual vision that expands her understanding of God and her own place in the universe, Mrs. Turpin herself facilitates a reconciliatory experience for a mother and daughter who have grown unable to communicate.

Similar to “Revelation,” Welty’s “A Memory” features an encounter between a protagonist and secondary mother/daughter characters that inspires an epiphany. In “A Memory,” the narrator recalls her fall from innocence to experience during an afternoon at a lake as an adolescent. It is one of only two stories in Welty’s first collection, A Curtain of Green, to employ a first-person narrator, which has prompted critics to venture that the story “functions as a memoir or fanciful redaction of Welty’s own memories.” Early on Welty establishes that the story is, at least in part, about perception; the narrator shares that “[e]ver since I had begun taking painting lessons, I had made small frames with my fingers, to look out at everything.” During the summer in question, she spends
her days lying “on the sand beside the small lake, with [her] hands squared over [her] eyes, finger tips touching, looking out by this device to see everything: which appeared as a kind of *projection*” (148, emphasis mine). Just as in O’Connor’s “Revelation,” psychological projection plays a central role in “A Memory.” Lionel Kelly notes that Welty’s use of “projection” here is “telling, both in its cinematic and painterly resonance and in its psychological significance as a term signifying the extension outward from the self to the other.”64 In “A Memory,” the narrator’s youthful fantasies of unrequited love are undercut by the unruly bodies of a family of fellow beachgoers, onto which she, like Mary Grace, projects her own fears of maternal abjection, fat, and class boundaries.

Before relaying the tale of her first love, the narrator reflects on her mental and emotional state at the time that the story takes place. She recalls that she “was at an age when [she] formed a judgment upon every person and every event which came under [her] eye, although [she] was easily frightened” (148). This fear, she clarifies, was caused by a disconnect between expectation and reality: “When a person, or a happening, seemed to me not in keeping with my opinion, or even my hope or expectation, I was terrified by a vision of abandonment and wildness which tore my heart with a kind of sorrow” (148). Just as she makes “small frames with [her] fingers” through which to view the world, the narrator imposes rigid conceptual and emotional frames on her experiences and encounters, and anyone who exceeds those frames has the power to dismantle the careful scaffolding of her psyche. She goes on to emphasize that her mother and father were unaware of the scope of her vision, that they thought she “saw nothing in the world which was not strictly coaxed into place like a vine on our garden trellis to be presented to my eyes,” indicating that she (like Mary Grace) is in the midst of individuating and
psychically separating from her parents at the time that the story begins (148). By establishing the narrator’s precarious perceptual apparatus and pubescent narcissism early in the story, Welty foreshadows the revelation that lies ahead.

As the narrator reminisces about her young crush, we learn more about her fears and prejudices. After touching the wrist of a boy with whom she has never spoken while passing him on the stairs in school, she fell “in love then for the first time” (149). The “love” that she proceeds to detail is an adolescent infatuation that takes place entirely in her own head. Her obsession with this boy heightens her powers of observation and indoctrinates her “almost into a dual life, as observer and dreamer. I felt a necessity for absolute conformity to my ideas in any happening I witnessed” (149). She recalls with “exact clarity” the day in class when she is introduced to the horror of abjection; she sees “red—vermilion—blood flow” from the boy’s nose when he gets a nose bleed, which causes her to faint and makes her forever “unable to bear the sight of blood” (150). As Patricia Yaeger implies, the fact that “several of the older girls laughed at the confusion and distraction” suggests that the blood seeping from the boy’s nose is reminiscent of menstrual blood, hence the narrator’s dramatic aversion to the sight of the blood may hint at unconscious fears of indoctrination into the realm of sexual reproduction and maternal abjection (150). Immediately following the nose bleed story, the narrator admits that the fact that she never knew “where this boy lived, or who his parents were” caused a “constant uneasiness” in her (150). The possibility that “his house might be slovenly and unpainted,” or that “his mother and father might be shabby—dishonest—crippled—dead” makes her anxious and wary, which reveals her class consciousness and prejudice (150). As Yaeger observes, “The girl’s position within a rigid class hierarchy is the most
predatory worry confronting her small sense of self.” By this point in the story, Welty has firmly established the narrator’s classism, psychological fragility, and general teen myopia. Like Mrs. Turpin, the narrator in “A Memory” is primed for a revelation. Enter: the fat people.

When the narrator emerges from her daydreams about the boy, she realizes that “a group of loud, squirming, ill-assorted people” have taken up residence near her spot on the beach (152). A family of five who are “brown and roughened, but not foreigners” and wearing “old and faded bathing suits which did not hide either the energy or the fatigue of their bodies, but showed it exactly” have settled on the beach so close to the narrator that she feels invaded by their presence (152). She determines right away from their demeanor and attire that they are “common”; like Mrs. Turpin, the narrator is quick to hierarchize others based on external characteristics. As she scrutinizes her new neighbors, she fixates on their bodies. Of the two boys, one is “greatly overgrown…his cheeks were ballooned outward and hid his eyes,” and the other “smaller boy was thin and defiant”; the man (presumably the father) has “flabby” arms, and the girl has a “narrowed figure” (152-53). She devotes the bulk of her attention and contempt, however, to the body of the mother, who lies still while the man scoops sand upon her legs:

She was unnaturally white and fatly aware, in a bathing suit which had no relation to the shape of her body. Fat hung upon her upper arms like an arrested earthslide on a hill. With the first motion she might make, I was afraid that she would slide down upon herself into a terrifying heap. Her breasts hung heavy and widening like pears into her bathing suit. Her legs lay prone one on the other like shadowed bulwarks, uneven and deserted, upon which, from the man’s hand, the sand piled
higher like the teasing threat of oblivion. A slow, repetitious sound I had been hearing for a long time unconsciously, I identified as a continuous laugh which came through the motionless open pouch of the woman. (153)

The length of this descriptive passage and its dearth of observations and metaphors evince how deeply disturbed the narrator is by this unruly feminine body. With her first observation, that the woman is “unnaturally white and fatly aware,” she seeks to emphatically delineate herself from the giant body; whereas the narrator herself is white, the fat woman is “unnaturally” so, meaning that she believes the two are not members of the same racial caste, and whereas the narrator is a fastidious “observer” of the world and her own psyche, the woman on the beach is aware only “fatly,” suggesting that her corpulence hinders her perception. Her fat is so volatile that it threatens a natural disaster in the form of an “earthslide”; notably, when the overweight Mrs. Turpin is attacked by hefty Mary Grace, she feels “certain that she was about to be in an earthquake” (206). While women have historically been associated with “earth” (and men with the “heavens”), these corpulent women are so disruptive to the natural order that they threaten geological events. For Welty and O’Connor, fat female bodies are so calamitous, so menacing that they have the power to rupture the very earth itself.

After watching the “common,” unappealing family’s antics that afternoon by the lake, the narrator experiences an unwelcome epiphany. When she attempts to revisit her “most inner dream” of touching the boy she loves on the stairs once the family has departed, she finds it impossible to inhabit that moment again: “I felt the heavy weight of sweetness which always accompanied this memory; but the memory itself did not come to me” (156). The memory of the boy and the memory of the unsavory family on the
beach have become intrinsically intertwined, which Stephen M. Fuller argues “exposes the gossamer of interconnected narratives that constitute a living memory.” Similar to “Revelation,” critical responses to “A Memory” overwhelmingly focus on the narrator’s emotional and mental journey. Yaeger asserts that “[a]lthough nothing happens, a little girl’s secure southern world comes crashing down around her,” because “Welty’s giantess is the terrible harbinger of change” (117, 118). Fuller argues that the narrator actually dreams the family of bathers, who “assume the position of her own family and who embody an oedipal scenario,” thereby enabling her to process her latent hostilities toward her parents (332). According to Courtney Bailey Parker, Welty’s story “depicts the development of an artist,” and the narrator’s reluctant discovery is “reminiscent of the iconic Joycean epiphany.” This “epiphany” that the narrator experiences is her discovery of the incompatibility of the concrete, imperfect reality of the world with the intangible, ethereal realm of fantasy and desire. As Parker and others have noted, Welty facilitates this epiphany through the abjection of the human body, thereby inviting “readers to forge connections between parallel narratives, the narrative of young love and the narrative of initiation into the physicality of sex and love, death and decay of the body.” Specifically, it is the body of the mother—a body ravaged by time and maternity—that induces the greatest repulsion, the most abject horror in the narrator. However, as with “Revelation,” I argue that it is not one body but two that instigate this story’s revelation; the narrator’s observations of and reactions to the complex and fraught relationship dynamics on display between the fat woman and her daughter suggest that though the abject body and boorish behavior of the mother repulse and frighten the narrator, the daughter’s resilience and rebellion inspire her.
From the description of the daughter that immediately follows the narrator’s long, churlish appraisal of the fat mother, it becomes evident that the girl feels trapped and conflicted. Welty portrays her as a powder keg about to explode: “The younger girl, who was lying at the man’s feet, was curled tensely upon herself. She wore a bright green bathing suit like a bottle from which she might, I felt, burst in a rage of churning smoke” (153). Unlike the other family members’ bathing suits that are so ill-fitting they “did not hide either the energy or the fatigue of their bodies,” the daughter’s suit seems to simultaneously confine and ignite her. Additionally, the image of a “bathing suit like a bottle” contrasts severely with the mother’s bathing suit, which “had no relation to the shape of her body.” As the narrator continues to observe the girl, she “could feel the genie-like rage in her narrowed figure as she seemed to both crawl and to lie still, watching the man heap the sand in his careless way about the larger legs of the older woman” (153). The bottle-like bathing suit symbolizes a genie’s bottle, signifying both power and imprisonment. Interestingly, the Arabic term jinn, from which the word “genie” derives, means “to hide” or “conceal.” Also, traditionally genies are only permitted to grant the wishes of others, not their own. Therefore, the description of the green bathing suit implies both that the daughter must hide or conceal her true self from her family members, and that she is expected to cater to the desires of others while denying her own. The appearance of being torn between stasis and action (“she seemed to both crawl and to lie still”) communicates her ambivalence toward her family, as well as her discomfort with her father’s activity; piling sand atop her mother’s “larger legs” draws even more attention to her mother’s enormous body, and is sexually suggestive. When her father pours sand inside her mother’s bathing suit “between her bulbous
descending breasts,” the daughter reacts oddly, almost violently: “Even the angry girl laughed, with an insistent hilarity which flung her to her feet and tossed her about the beach, her stiff, cramped legs jumping and tottering” (154). Through these erratic, jerky movements, the daughter appears almost possessed, unable to control her bodily movements. Every observation that the narrator makes about the girl’s body language paints her as a conflicted outlier in her family.

As the daughter is “tossed…about the beach” after the man pours sand down the front of the fat woman’s bathing suit, the man smiles and looks directly at the narrator, which causes her resentment toward the bathers to increase: “He even looked at me, and included me. Looking back, stunned, I wished that they all were dead” (154). If we accept Fuller’s claim that the family of bathers represents the narrator’s own “oedipal scenario,” then in this moment the narrator rejects her entire family outright. In the very next moment, however, the girl causes the narrator to reconsider: “But at that moment the girl in the green bathing suit suddenly whirled all the way around” (155, emphasis added). This “But” following directly after “I wished that they all were dead” indicates that the girl may have the power to somewhat redeem her family in the narrator’s eyes. Indeed, as the narrator then describes the girl chasing after the two boys, her language is almost laudatory: “The girl in green then came running toward the beach as though she would destroy it, and with a fierceness which took my breath away, she dragged herself through the air and jumped over the bench” (155). In this description, the girl is a warrior attacking the very earth itself with an arresting “fierceness” that seems to inspire the narrator; given the fact that the fat mother is described in earthy metaphors, this moment could be read as the daughter’s unconscious expression of oedipal rage toward her
mother. If the narrator does indeed project her family drama onto this family of bathers, then this girl’s powerful rebellious spirit serves as a model for the narrator as she seeks to separate from her own parents. Significantly, however, “no one seemed to notice” the girl storming the beach “except the smaller boy” (155). Ultimately, both the girl and the narrator are alone in their struggles against their families and the world.

The narrator’s fixation on the mother’s corpulent body and actions of the daughter’s body intimates that this mother/daughter relationship is integral to the epiphany she experiences by the lake. Regarding “A Memory,” Welty writes, “The tableau discovered through the young girl’s framing hands is unwelcome realism.” It is significant that this “unwelcome realism” intervenes via her encounter with the fat, crude family that ruins her love memory, because the boy and the fantasy he inspires signal a heteronormative future of marriage, sex, motherhood, and death—a futurity that will consume and ravage her young, thin body, and risk making her “common” like them. As Miller notes in Being Ugly, “What we understand as ‘ugliness’ is often history rendered visible: stretch marks, scars, wrinkles, and posture are all potentially revelatory of a woman’s life. Life leaves marks on their bodies that can be read as an archive or a palimpsest.” This kind of “ugliness” marks the fat woman’s body, and it is an image which becomes forever linked to the narrator’s memory of her “first love.”

As a grown woman looking back on this watershed moment in her adolescence, the narrator reveals through her obsession with the mother’s fat body that the abjection she witnesses that day on the beach haunts her into adulthood. From the conclusion of “Revelation,” it is apparent that Ruby Turpin, too, will be haunted by her encounter with Mary Grace and her mother; as she cleans out the hog pen later that day, she addresses
God with “concentrated fury”: “How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?” (215). I propose that the secondary mother/daughter characters in “Revelation” and “A Memory” induce uncanny experiences for the stories’ protagonists, which, in turn, catalyze their epiphanies. Freud defines the uncanny as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar,” which is similar to Kristeva’s theory of abjection. In *The Uncanny*, Freud explains that the act of doubling—of dividing or interchanging the self, often through projection onto another—was “originally an insurance against the extinction of the self” during the stage of primary narcissism, but with time and age “the meaning of the ‘double’ changes” and it becomes “the uncanny harbinger of death.” We repress the uncanny, but it can resurface “either when repressed childhood complexes are revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been surmounted appear to be once again confirmed.” As aforementioned, according to Kristeva, the mother’s body is our earliest experience of the abject, and it becomes that which we must reject and repress in order to develop our own subjectivity. In “A Memory,” the fat woman’s maternal body signifies both the “maternal entity” that the narrator has repressed and a potential future self. With the family of bathers representing the narrator’s own “oedipal scenario,” the encounter with her “doubles” (i.e., a current self and a future self) causes the narrator to apprehend her future, which will end in decay and death. In “Revelation,” Mary Grace’s violent outburst followed by her intimate, pre-Oedipal exchange with her mother trigger an uncanny experience for Mrs. Turpin, causing her to contemplate her eventual death. Additionally, the experience compels her to lash out against the repressed maternal, which is evident in her torturing of “an old sow a few weeks off from farrowing” in the
hog pen by “blindly pointing the stream of water in and out of [its] eye” (215); indeed, perhaps even Mrs. Turpin’s childlessness could be read as an attempt to repress the maternal. Now, tormenting a pregnant hog and imagining herself in the grotesque image of “a hog and me both,” Mrs. Turpin comes face to face with her eventual death, inspired by the encounter with her double—Mary Grace, “the uncanny harbinger of death.”

**Sacrificing the Fat Daughter**

Similar to “Revelation” and “A Memory,” Eudora Welty’s “June Recital” contains a mother/daughter duo that helps facilitate an epiphany for a narrator. However, in this instance it is not just the narrator but rather an entire community that projects its insecurities regarding fat, freedom, and the female body onto the pair. As Germans living in the South, Miss Eckhart and her elderly, infirm mother inspire a revelation for Cassie Morrison, one of the story’s two narrators and the Eckharts’ next-door neighbor. Although Miss Eckhart serves as a sort of surrogate mother figure to her students, her childless, spinster status and her role as caretaker to an elderly mother confined to a wheelchair render her a perpetual daughter in the eyes of the community. By the end of the story we learn that Miss Eckhart serves as a scapegoat for the whole town, as she is sacrificed in order to reaffirm the patriarchal boundaries of Morgana, Mississippi.

Miss Eckhart’s tale serves as the centerpiece of “June Recital,” the second story in Welty’s second short story collection, *The Golden Apples* (1949). Once the town piano teacher, an older, mentally precarious Miss Eckhart has returned to her former home to set it on fire. Through Cassie’s narration we get a glimpse into Miss Eckhart’s history in the Morgana community—from the height of her piano tutelage (which culminated in a
formal recital every June for “all female Morgana”) to her eventual admittance to a mental facility.77 “June Recital” establishes the importance of matrilineage, conformity, and surveillance in the Morgana community—themes that recur throughout the other interrelated stories of The Golden Apples, which follow the same characters for decades.

As their next-door neighbor and one of Miss Eckhart’s pupils, Cassie Morrison regularly witnesses the relationship between Miss Eckhart and Old Mrs. Eckhart:

Cassie would rather look at the two of them at night separated by the dark and the distance between. For when from your own table you saw the Eckharts through their window in the light of a lamp, and Miss Eckhart with a soundless ebullience bouncing up to wait on her mother, sometimes you could imagine them back far away from Morgana, before they had troubles and before they had come to you—plump, bright, and sweet somewhere. (62)

In addition to giving us a glimpse of the dynamic between daughter and mother when the Eckharts are alone, this passage also illustrates the prevalence of surveillance in this community. In particular, the women of the town enforce behavioral and aesthetic standards by emphasizing matrilineage: “As each daughter thus struggles to define herself in the shadow of her mother, all Morgana watches to see how she fulfills her role.”78 In the Eckharts, Cassie sees an alternative model for the mother/daughter relationship that, at times, confuses and alarms her. For instance, when Old Mrs. Eckhart interrupts a lesson with Virgie Rainey—Miss Eckhart’s best (and favorite) student—by screaming at her one day, her daughter responds swiftly: “When she reached her mother, Miss Eckhart slapped the side of her mouth. She stood there a moment more, leaning over the chair—while it seemed to Cassie that it must, after all, have been the mother that
slapped the daughter” (62). Such a display of anger and dominance by a daughter against her mother is so unfamiliar to Cassie that she has trouble believing her own eyes, even when the encounter happens right in front of her.

In her relationship with her own mother, Cassie feels insecure and neglected. Mrs. Morrison is portrayed as a flighty yet proper Southern lady—a conformist who secretly longs to be an artist. To Cassie, it seems as if her mother is constantly disappearing: “when she got back to their place her mother would be gone. She always lost her mother”; “And her mother had slipped away” (53, 55). Mrs. Morrison’s emotional and physical distance causes her daughter anxiety and uncertainty. Additionally, Cassie notices the tension that exists between her mother and Miss Eckhart. She can tell that her mother “could not help but despise Miss Eckhart,” possibly “just for living, a poor unwanted teacher and unmarried,” and she senses that “her mother despised herself for despising” (64). At one point, Mrs. Morrison even likens Miss Eckhart to the witch from *Hansel and Gretel* (39). Cassie supposes that this is why her mother continues to make her take piano lessons, even after all of the other mothers have stopped sending their daughters: “The child had to make up for her mother’s abhorrence, to keep her mother as kind as she really was” (64). In other words, in the Morgana community, the sins of the mother are visited upon the daughter: “Daughters remain in the social caste of their mothers from their birth to her death or beyond.” This idea is also apparent in the way the community responds after Miss Eckhart is sexually assaulted by a black man; when Miss Perdita Mayo says that “Miss Eckhart’s *differences* were why shame alone had not killed her and killed her mother too” in the aftermath of the assault, it suggests that the
fates of mothers and daughters in Morgana are believed to be intrinsically tied (57, second emphasis added).

In addition to exposing Cassie to an alternative mother/daughter dynamic, Miss Eckhart represents a level of feminine independence and power that is both new and somewhat frightening to her young female students. As Michael Kreyling observes, Miss Eckhart brings her pupils “an ominous foreshadowing of their own possibilities as daughters and women.” This is perhaps most apparent in a scene that takes place one summer morning during a thunderstorm when Cassie, Virgie Rainey, and Jinny Love end up trapped in the studio with Miss Eckhart as they wait out the rain. Miss Eckhart sits down at the piano and begins to play a long, complicated piece; it is the first time her students have seen her play. Her performance is passionate and visceral: “The thunder rolled and Miss Eckhart frowned and bent forward or she leaned back to play; at moments her solid body swayed from side to side like a tree trunk” (56). This act of artistic expression begins to physically transform her: “Her skin flattened and drew across her cheeks, her lips changed. The face could have belonged to someone else—not even to a woman, necessarily. It was the face a mountain could have, or what might be seen behind the veil of a waterfall” (56). Miss Eckhart becomes so lost in the music that, when Jinny Love steps forward to turn the sheet music for her, “Miss Eckhart did not even see her—her arm struck the child, making a run” (56). The three girls are overwhelmed and discomfited by this sudden artistic expression: “Coming from Miss Eckhart, the music made all the pupils uneasy, almost alarmed; something had burst out, unwanted, exciting, from the wrong person’s life” (56). It becomes “too much for Cassie Morrison,” who stands back in the room “with her whole body averted” from Miss Eckhart’s raw,
powerful energy (57). The young girls have never witnessed such a passionate display of feminine strength before, and it makes them so uncomfortable that they long for “escape” (57). Interestingly, it is at this moment that we first learn about Miss Eckhart’s sexual assault, as Cassie begins “to think of an incident that had happened to Miss Eckhart instead of about the music she was playing” (57). Patricia Yaeger has argued that this illustrates how the children have already internalized the rigid values of their community and instinctively seek to squash female independence: “When Miss Eckhart raises herself to great heights, revealing a musical brilliance reserved for great men, her pupils find a way to restore her abjection and lowliness.”

Significantly, the description of Miss Eckhart’s performance emphasizes her large body, which Yaeger has referred to as “gargantuan”: “Miss Eckhart threatens her pupils because her body suggests a different world in which women are allowed to be noisy and grand. The gargantuan body both maps its own limits and refuses to stay within bounds, to serve asked-for ends.” Indeed, throughout “June Recital” Miss Eckhart is depicted as a fat woman whose unruly, abject body spills out into the surrounding space: “Miss Eckhart, a heavy brunette woman whose age was not known, sat during the lessons on the non-descript chair, which her body hid altogether, in apparent disregard for body and chair alike” (39). Her “great lump of a body,” which “sit[s] there blotting out her chair,” will not be contained by either furniture or clothing: “The unexpected creamy flesh on her upper arms gave her a look of emerging from [her recital dress]” (58, 46, 72).

Notably, the language Welty uses to describe Miss Eckhart’s piano playing (“like a tree trunk,” “the face a mountain could have,” “her fingers like foam on rocks” [56, 58]) and her physicality during piano lessons (“you were under her bosom like a traveler under a
cliff” [40]) recalls the earthy metaphors used to describe Mrs. Turpin in “Revelation” and
the fat woman in “A Memory.” A large woman, it seems, is a force of nature. However,
as we will see, Miss Eckhart pays for this strength.

During her concert, Yaeger argues, “Miss Eckhart’s body swells to enormous
proportions; she represents new and frightening parameters for southern women’s lives”
(122). These “parameters” defy the standards for both feminine ability and aesthetics that
have been set by this small, Southern community. In other words, both the brilliance of
Miss Eckhart’s performance and her fat body are “too much” because they exceed her
students’ frame of reference; for the young girls, the experience is akin to emerging out
of Plato’s cave and trying to apprehend reality for the first time: “And when he came into
the light, with the sun filling his eyes, wouldn’t he be unable to see a single one of the
things now said to be true?” But, similar to Plato’s cave dwellers, the girls are resistant
and reluctant to embrace a new reality, which is why Cassie recalls the rape when Miss
Eckhart’s playing begins to threaten her world view. As a good citizen of Morgana, in
that instant she is projecting her community’s fears of female strength, miscegenation,
and fat female bodies by interjecting Miss Eckhart’s “shameful,” disenfranchising
experience into her most powerful moment. Rather than expand Cassie’s realm of
possibility, Miss Eckhart’s performance begins to expose how constrained her vision
really is; by the time, as a teenager, she hears a broken, demented Miss Eckhart play Für
Elise next door, Cassie already knows that unlike adventurous, capricious individuals like
Virgie Rainey, her brother Loch, or her mother, “She could not see herself do an
unknown thing” (77). Ultimately, the epiphany that Miss Eckhart and her mother inspire
for Cassie reveals her own confinement in the community and her inability to go against the status quo.

As I have already established, in the “maternal carceral network” of Morgana, the lives and fates of mothers and daughters seem inescapably intertwined—an idea which is evident in the ends of Miss Eckhart and her mother. Through Cassie’s narration, we learn of the rumors surrounding Old Mrs. Eckhart’s demise:

Then stories began to be told of what Miss Eckhart had really done to her old mother. People said the old mother had been in pain for years, and nobody was told. What kind of pain they did not say. But they said that during the war, when Miss Eckhart lost pupils and they did not have very much to eat, she would give her mother paregoric to make sure she slept all night and not wake the street with noise or complaint, for fear still more pupils would be taken away. Some people said Miss Eckhart killed her mother with opium. (65)

Miss Eckhart’s attempts to placate the community prove fatal for her mother, and Miss Eckhart ends up disappearing from Morgana, likely into a mental institution. Recalling Cassie’s line “Should daughters forgive mothers (with mothers under their heel)?”, Rebecca Mark argues that, in the Homeric tradition, Old Mrs. Eckhart represents her daughter’s Achilles’s heel, that she is “her most vulnerable point.” Mark writes, “Miss Eckhart’s mother is not only her biological mother, she is her self, the woman she might become. Her mother’s pain is her own pain. Her mother’s stifled screams are her own stifled screams.” Indeed, Old Mrs. Eckhart may be perceived as Miss Eckhart’s greatest weakness as well as an extension of herself. However, upon closer examination, the heel
metaphor may also signal a subtle corporeal connection between mother and daughter that ultimately seals their fate in the Morgana community.

Miss Eckhart’s large body, as I have noted, is monitored, disparaged, and fetishized by the town. One particular area of interest is her lower body—specifically, her ankles and legs: “Miss Eckhart had pretty ankles for a heavy lady like herself. Mrs. Stark said what a surprise it was for Miss Eckhart, of all people, to turn up with such pretty ankles, which made it the same as if she didn’t have them” (50). Significantly, at the end of the story when Cassie sees Miss Eckhart being dragged down the street after attempting to set fire to her old residence, it is the sight of her ankles that inspires the moment of recognition: “She wore shoes without stockings—and she had such white, white ankles. When she saw the ankles, Cassie flung herself in full view at the window and gave a cry” (88). Similar to the day of the impromptu piano performance, when Miss Eckhart’s mountainous, “solid,” powerful body was too much for Cassie to comprehend, recognizing Miss Eckhart through the sight of one small body part seems to indicate that Cassie is still unable to apprehend her teacher in her entirety. Notably, Old Mrs. Eckhart’s lower body is also emphasized: “She had wasting legs that showed knifelike down her long skirt, and clumsy-shaped, suffering feet that she placed just so out in front of her on the step of her chair, as if she wanted you to think they were pretty” (61).

Unlike her daughter’s “pretty ankles” and large legs, Mrs. Eckhart’s lower body is depicted as unattractive (“clumsy-shaped, suffering feet”), overly thin (“wasting”), and dangerous (“knifelike”). As aforementioned, Rebecca Marks asserts that Old Mrs. Eckhart is her daughter’s Achilles’s heel, and that “Her mother’s pain is her own pain,” implying that the alleged opium overdose was an act of mercy on the part of a devoted
daughter. However, some scholars have argued that an element of jealousy exists in this mother/daughter relationship. Regarding the moment when Old Mrs. Eckhart breaks a doll given to Miss Eckhart by a man whom she secretly loves and desires from afar, Helen Hurt Tiegreen writes, “Miss Eckhart’s mother was jealous of all that her daughter loved, even though her daughter, whose ‘spirit drooped its head’ (41), did not have much love in her life.”

In response to the scene where Miss Eckhart slaps her mother for her outburst during Virgie Rainey’s lesson, Donna Jarrell posits, “[Miss Eckhart] will not allow her mother to suppress Virgie Rainey’s gift, as we suspect her mother may have once done to her.” I argue that this jealousy and resentment possibly played a role in Old Mrs. Eckhart’s death; rather than caring for her “most vulnerable point” by putting her mother out of her misery, Miss Eckhart may have been expressing latent hostilities toward her mother by committing an act of elder abuse.

Additionally, I propose that the attention paid to the Eckharts’ ankles, feet, and legs highlights the community’s desire to limit the women’s social and economic mobility—to cut them off at the knees, so to speak—and to emphasize their outsider status in the town. The lower body enables physical mobility, but in the case of the Eckharts I argue that it becomes a metaphor for socio-economic mobility as well. Furthermore, in various Eastern religious traditions, the lower body signifies the root chakra, which connects us to tribal identity and power: “It is our connection to traditional familial beliefs that support the formation of identity and a sense of belonging to a group of people in a geographic location.” The reason why Mrs. Stark is so surprised by Miss Eckhart’s “pretty ankles” is because she believes that a fat, unmarried Other should not have the same ability to traverse the different strata of society as other members of the
community (and, as Cassie notes, her “surprise” erases or negates that ability—i.e.,
“which made it the same as if she didn’t have them”). Significantly, when Miss Eckhart
returns years later to burn down her old home, Cassie’s brother Loch, while watching her
through his bedroom window, notes that “He could not see her feet; she behaved a little
like a wind-up toy on wheels” (29). In addition to losing her home, her only family
member, her profession, and her freedom, Miss Eckhart has also lost her connection to
the earth—the source of her strength. The community has finally succeeded in cutting her
off at the knees, in severing her root chakra. When Loch watches her run from across the
street, he observes that “She pulled up the corners of her skirt up like a girl, and she was
thin beneath in her old legs,” which recalls Old Mrs. Eckhart’s “wasting,” “knifelike”
legs (31). Without a firm foundation or sense of belonging in the community, both
mother and daughter waste away into nothing: “[Miss Eckhart] was not connected with
anything else, with anybody” (31, emphasis added). In the end, both her body and her
identity are erased: “It don’t signify nothing what your name is now, or what you
intended, old woman…We know where you belong at, and that’s Jackson [i.e., the nearby
mental institution],” Mr. Fatty Bowles tells her before he and the town marshal cart her
away (87).

Ultimately, the entire community projects its fear of fat, freedom, and the female
body onto Miss Eckhart, whose abject body becomes a scapegoat that helps reify and
reaffirm the traditional, patriarchal boundaries of the community. As Jacques Derrida
points out in his discussion of the pharmakos (which, he notes, “has been compared to a
scapegoat”), “The city’s body proper thus reconstitutes its unity, closes around the
security of its inner courts, gives back to itself the word that links it with itself within the
confines of the agora, by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression.”90 Yet, as Derrida also notes, the scapegoat is actually *constituted* by the community, and therefore never truly external to it; the scapegoat “represents evil both introjected and projected.”91 To return briefly to Le’a Kent’s argument regarding fat and abjection, the fat female body is “that which must be expelled to make all other bodily representations and functions, even life itself, possible.”92 As a fat, unmarried, German woman living in a Southern patriarchal community, Miss Eckhart is triply erased—as a fat body, as a childless woman, and as an ethnic Other. In expelling Miss Eckhart, Morgana sacrifices a perpetual daughter (i.e., a childless woman) to appease the gods of convention, racism, and misogyny.

In *One Writer’s Beginnings*, Eudora Welty confesses that though it was never her intention to create a character who would speak for her, in *The Golden Apples* she “did bring forth a character with whom [she] came to feel oddly in touch. This is Miss Eckhart.”93 She shares that “Miss Eckhart came from me,” and “Exposing yourself to risk is a truth Miss Eckhart and I had in common.”94 Welty, like Flannery O’Connor, never married or had children, so perhaps it is not surprising that she identified so deeply with Miss Eckhart, a spinster artist and teacher. Interestingly, though, Welty also makes a point to distance herself from the character: “Not in Miss Eckhart as she stands *solidly* and almost *opaquely* in the surround of her story, but in the making of her character out of my most inward and most deeply feeling self, I would say I have found my voice in my fiction.”95 This language is reminiscent of Welty’s description of Miss Eckhart’s physicality during her piano performance (“her *solid* body swayed from side to side like a
tree trunk”), and the term “opaquely” recalls the image of Miss Eckhart’s fat body “blotting out her chair” at the piano. By emphasizing that her kinship with Miss Eckhart is psychical and not corporeal, Welty seems to exhibit subtle (perhaps even unconscious) fat prejudice. This observation notwithstanding, Welty’s portrayal of Miss Eckhart’s “gargantuan” body in “June Recital” (and that of the fat female bather in “A Memory”) suggests that she was aware of the ways in which fat female bodies are abjected and marginalized in Western society.

Welty was a very private figure who shared little of her personal life with her audience, but from the limited biographical information available it appears as if she had a positive, loving relationship with her own mother, Chestina Andrews Welty, who was incredibly supportive of her daughter’s pursuits: “It was my mother who emotionally and imaginatively supported me in my wish to become a writer.”96 Similar to O’Connor, Welty moved from New York (where she had been studying advertising at Columbia University) back to her home in Jackson, Mississippi around the time her father died in 1931; she remained there for most of her life and cared for her mother until her death in 1966. When asked once in an interview if she were “Mother oppressed,” Welty replied, “Not at all.”97 However, in One Writer’s Beginnings, a collection of her autobiographical writing, a subtle current of tension undergirds some of her stories about her mother. For instance, at times Chestina comes across as a martyr (“All my life I continued to feel that bliss for me would have to imply my mother’s deprivation or sacrifice”), or as an overbearing perfectionist (“A way had to be found around [my mother’s] love sometimes”).98 From the prevalence of mothers and daughters in her fiction, it is evident
that Welty continued to be preoccupied with the complexity and intimacy of the mother/daughter relationship throughout her career.

Notably, in the short stories of both O’Connor and Welty that I have examined herein, the focus of the narratives tends to be on the voices and experiences of the daughter characters rather than the mothers. The same could be said about many of the authors’ other works as well; for instance, Welty’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel The Optimist’s Daughter (1972) is told from the point-of-view of a daughter coming to terms with her father’s death, and even in stories told from the perspective of a mother (for example, the grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find”), O’Connor tends to subtly mock and deride her mother characters (although, to some extent, the same could be said about many of O’Connor’s character). As women who never became mothers themselves, perhaps it is unsurprising that their primary investment in the mother/daughter relationships they depict tends to reflect their own positioning in that dyad. However, in so doing they reiterate a problematic trope that Marianne Hirsch examines in The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism. Hirsch writes, “It is the woman as daughter who occupies the center of the global reconstruction of subjectivity and subject-object relation. The woman as mother remains in the position of other, and the emergence of feminine-daughterly subjectivity rests and depends on that continued and repeated process of othering the mother.” By silencing or omitting the voice of the mother (for instance, we never hear either Old Mrs. Eckhart or the fat woman in “A Memory” speak) and/or “othering the mother” (as O’Connor tends to do with her mother characters), Welty and O’Connor transpose the same type of disenfranchisement
and projection that they critique through their daughter characters onto their fictional mothers.

O’Connor once summarized her “subject in fiction” as “the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil.” I believe that these five short stories demonstrate that the “devil” is neither the mother nor the daughter, but rather a patriarchal society that demands a repression of the maternal, that renders the daughter’s body a battleground in mother/daughter relationships. As Luce Irigaray writes, “Neither the little girl nor the women needs to give up the love for her mother. To do so is to sever women from the roots of their identity and their subjectivity.” Perhaps the “action of grace,” then, comes in the moments of recognition, such as when Sally Virginia looks up at her mother’s face as their farm blazes and is able to place the “new unplaced misery” that has just made her a woman.


4 Gleeson-White, 56.


13 Ibid., 237.

14 Ibid., 244.


18 Westling, “Mothers and Daughters,” 510.

21 Westling, *Sacred Groves*, 147.
22 Chodorow, 103.
23 Ibid., 138.
26 Ibid., 46.
27 Ibid., 27.
28 Ibid., 102.
29 Ibid., 47.
30 Ibid., 89. O’Connor later wrote about “My Relatives” that “It was in the naturalistic vein and was not well received” (Gooch 39).
31 Ibid., 47.
33 Ibid., 65.
34 Ibid., 150.
35 Miller, 2.
36 Ibid., 4.
37 Ibid., 17.
38 Westling, “Mothers and Daughters,” 513.
39 Miller, 138.
41 Stearns, 85.
43 Ibid., 100.
44 Ibid., 102.
47 Ibid., 135.
48 Kristeva, 239.
50 O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 118.

In her essay “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” O’Connor describes the grotesque in fiction as works in which “we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man many never experience in his ordinary life” (*Mystery* 40).

Westling describes the encounter as a greater violation than a “normal physical rape,” and Gleeson-White claims that the “treacherous seduction” is “more properly, rape” (“Mothers and Daughters,” 520, Gleeson-White, 53).


Since there is no mention of any children ever being born to the Turpins, it seems likely that Mrs. Turpin, who is beyond child-bearing age, either chose not to have children or was not physically able to have children.

For instance, A. R. Coulthard examines how “Revelation” charts “Mrs. Turpin’s reluctant progress to salvation,” after “the girl, symbolically named Mary Grace…knock[s] Mrs. Turpin silly in order to knock her sane.” (A. R. Coulthard, “From Sermon to Parable: Four Conversion Stories by Flannery O’Connor,” *American Literature* 55, No. 1 [1983]: 55-71, 65.) Joyce Carol Oates writes of Mrs. Turpin’s final vision, “This is the most powerful of O’Connor’s revelations, because it questions the very foundations of our assumptions of the ethical life.” (Joyce Carol Oates, “The Visionary Art of Flannery O’Connor,” in *New Heaven, New Earth: The Visionary Experience of Literature* [New York: The Vanguard Press, 1974], 174.) Jacky Dumas and Jessica Hooten Wilson assert that O’Connor “emulates the cryptic nature of the apocalyptical writings of both the Old and New Testament” to give Mrs. Turpin “a revelation about her misperceived righteousness.” (Jacky Dumas and Jessica Hooten Wilson, “The Unrevealed in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Revelation,’” *The Southern Literary Journal* XLV, No. 2 [2013]: 72-89, 72.)


Dumas and Wilson, 77.


Chodorow, 138.


Yaeger, 133.

Ibid.


Miller, 28.

Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McClintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 124. Although, Kristeva claims that the abject is more “violent” (and more alienating) than the uncanny: “Essentially different from ‘uncanniness,’ more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (233).

Freud, 142.

Ibid., 155.

Kristeva, 239.


Tiegreen, 143.

Kreyling, 122.

Yaeger, 125.

Ibid., 126.


Ibid., 80.

Tiegreen, 155.


Ibid., 133.
92 Kent, 135.
93 Welty, One Writer’s Beginnings, 100.
94 Ibid., 101.
95 Ibid., emphasis added.
96 Ibid., 81.
98 Welty, One Writer’s Beginnings, 19, 39.
100 O’Connor, Mystery and Manners, 118.
101 Irigaray, 20.
CHAPTER 2

THE “BALLOONING BODY” IN SYLVIA PLATH
AND GWENDOLYN BROOKS

As women living and writing during the “cult of domesticity” of the 1950s and
60s, mid-century poets Sylvia Plath and Gwendolyn Brooks contended with hegemonic
racial and gender expectations in their roles as writers, daughters, and mothers. Plath’s
profound maternal ambivalence and infamously tumultuous relationship with her mother
Brooks’s experiences as a dutiful (and precocious) daughter, devoted mother, and black
rights activist inflect her poetry and semi-autobiographical novel *Maud Martha* (1953). In
their work, both authors dramatize the process of becoming a mother and admitting the
abjection of the child-bearing body, in part as a way of navigating their overly close
relationships with their own mothers. Indeed, bodily abjection shapes mother/daughter
relationships in Plath’s and Brooks’s writing and lives and demonstrates their racialized
strategies for negotiating these broached boundaries. Notably, their different approaches
to pregnancy and childbirth, feminine abjection, and the process of daughters becoming
mothers illustrate the ways in which the construction of whiteness as “invisible” and
blackness as inescapable corporeality undergird notions of femininity and reproduction,
as white Plath imagines transcending the body, while black Brooks turns abjection into a
platform for activism.1
Due to their fifteen-year age gap and racial differences, Plath and Brooks are rarely paired in critical studies; however, I argue that the similar aesthetic trajectory of their work and their shared preoccupation with mothers and daughters provide a unique opportunity to examine how race and maternal abjection intersect in mid-century writing by women authors. Both married and mothers of two children, the two writers initially adhered to a patriarchal, Eurocentric formalism and universality in their early poetry, writing for a primarily white, male critical audience. However, as Malin Pereira observes, Plath and Brooks “each use their single novel to effect an aesthetic transition to admitting domestic detail in their work,” and this “focus on domestic detail is part of the twentieth-century transition to an anti-Idealist aesthetic of everyday detail.” Plath and Brooks’s transition to an embrace and exploration of domestic life and Plath’s shift to an impassioned confessionalism in her later poetry exemplify the mid-century struggle of women attempting to locate and assert a sense of self in a racist and misogynistic society. Their focus on the mother/daughter relationship is particularly significant and ground-breaking because, as Adrienne Rich notes in Of Woman Born, this dyad “has been minimized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchy” since “the relationship between mother and daughter has been profoundly threatening to men.” Therefore, Plath and Brooks’s emphasis on mother/daughter relationships becomes a subversive swipe at the male critical audience that they initially sought to appease. However, what repeatedly emerges from their explorations of this originary relationship are elements of matrophobia, or the fear of becoming one’s mother, which is often fueled by societal influences that infiltrate the relationship. Rich points out that it is “[e]asier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her.”
this matrophobia can also signal a much greater fear, as it “may also be a deep underlying pull toward [the mother], a dread that if one relaxes one’s guard one will identify with her completely.”\(^5\) In what follows, a consideration of French feminist Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theories regarding abjection, the maternal body, and the cathectic split between mother and daughter will reveal how the “deep underlying pull” and fear of overidentification with the mother manifest in works by Plath and Brooks. In particular, the leaking, swollen, unpredictable pregnant body instills fear and resentment, and often serves as a barrier between mothers and daughters, even as it links them by projecting the imminent transformation of the daughter into the mother.

“All Ready to Spill Out”: Birth and the Specter of Abjection

In works by Plath and Brooks, maternal abjection incites dread and disgust in both mother and daughter characters. According to Julia Kristeva, the abject both threatens and constitutes an individual’s identity. As that which “is radically excluded” and draws us “toward the place where meaning collapses,” the abject exists at the border between subject and object, life and death.\(^6\) While bodily fluids, excrement, and corpses are examples of abjection, Kristeva clarifies that the ramifications of the term exceed the material: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order.”\(^7\) Since “[t]he abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I,” we necessarily reject it to establish and maintain subjectivity, yet it forever lurks in “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” as a force that can rupture or annihilate that subjectivity.\(^8\) Significantly, our initial experience of abjection is the maternal body.
As Kelly Oliver observes, “Human life, human society, is founded on the abject separation of one body from another at birth.” Though inescapable requirements for the creation of life, pregnancy and birth are culturally coded as abject. From the bulging, excessive form of a pregnant body, to the leaking, seeping fluids of birth and lactation, to the womb “phantasized as a devouring mouth,” the maternal body resides at the very border between subject and object. Sara Ruddick notes, “Regarded ungenerously, a woman’s birthing body—bloody, swollen out of shape, exposed in its pain, its otherwise concealed parts broken open—is repellent.” Beyond these material aspects of maternal abjection lie its psychological and existential implications for both mother and child. Kristeva refers to pregnancy as “the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of an other.” The pregnant woman becomes more than one, but not quite two. After birth, the child begins the gradual process of recognizing herself as separate from her mother, which ultimately necessitates the rejection of the maternal body in order to enter the symbolic order, or the realm of language. Kristeva writes, “The abject confronts us…with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language.” In other words, the maternal body will forever remain linked to the abject—to that which threatens the boundary between subject and object. Consequently, it “is a horrifying, devouring body…a body that evokes rage and fear.”

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood’s aversion to pregnant and fat bodies exemplifies this fear of maternal abjection. Originally published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in the U.K. in 1963, *The Bell Jar* is a semi-autobiographical account of Plath’s first suicide attempt and subsequent hospitalization in 1953. The novel is a
bildungsroman that, as Linda Wagner-Martin notes, “charts what it means to be wife, mother, daughter. Every detail in the novel speaks to some ritualized feminine behavior.” Early in the novel, Esther visits her boyfriend Buddy Willard, a medical student, and the two observe a woman giving birth. The cold, sterile, torturous environment of the birthing room renders Esther speechless (“I was so struck by the sight of the table where they were lifting the woman I didn’t say a word”), and the sight of the pregnant woman repulses her: “The woman’s stomach stuck up so high I couldn’t see her face or the upper part of her body at all. She seemed to have nothing but an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs propped in the high stirrups.” In this description of the anonymous woman’s physicality, the abjection of pregnancy has erased her identity (“I couldn’t see her face”) and humanity (“spider-fat”), illustrating Ruddick’s claim that “[b]irth, more than any other experience except perhaps sexuality, undermines the individuation of bodies.” Esther describes the crowning of the head in grotesque terms: “finally through the split, shaven place between her legs, lurid with disinfectant, I saw a dark fuzzy thing appear” (66). Later, she describes a pregnant woman in her neighborhood as having “a grotesque, protruding stomach,” and she declares that “children made me sick” (116, 117). For Esther, a pregnant body is “the grotesque body,” which Mary Russo defines as “the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change.” Pregnancy, birth, and their by-products (i.e., children) repulse Esther, as they remind her of this “body of becoming” that she so fears.

Esther’s loathing of swollen, “enormous” pregnant bodies is so intense that it extends to fat bodies as well. When she gains weight as a result of her insulin treatment, she conflates pregnancy and fatness: “I just grew fatter and fatter. Already I had filled the
new, too-big clothes my mother had bought, and when I peered down at my plump stomach and my broad hips I thought it was a good thing Mrs. Guinea [Esther’s benefactor] hadn’t seen me like this, because I looked just as if I were going to have a baby” (192). Throughout the novel, Esther exhibits fat prejudice. During her summer internship at a fashion magazine in New York City, she prides herself on her thin, unfeminine figure (“I was skinny as a boy and barely rippled”) and judges the women around her on diets (“Almost everybody I met in New York was trying to reduce”) because she has always been naturally slim: “No matter how much I eat, I never put on weight. With one exception I’ve been the same weight for ten years” (7, 25, 24). She inwardly mocks the “tall fat medical student” she meets during her visit with Buddy (“[I] had thought up a cutting remark about how only a mother loves a fat man”), judges Buddy harshly for his previous interest in Joan (“She was big as a horse, too. I began to think Buddy had pretty poor taste”), and is disgusted when Buddy gains weight during his stay at the sanatorium: “The last thing I expected was for Buddy to be fat…But everything concave about Buddy had suddenly turned convex. A pot belly swelled under the tight white nylon shirt and his cheeks were round and plump and ruddy as marzipan fruit. Even his laugh sounded plump” (64, 59, 90). Esther expresses as much fear and disdain for fat bodies as she does for pregnant ones. In her essay “Fighting Abjection,” Le’a Kent posits, “Within mainstream representations of the body, the fat body functions as the abject: it takes up the burden of representing the horror of the body itself for the culture at large.” For Esther, fat represents that which “disturbs identity, system, order,” and is therefore abject; the fat body signifies the same volatility and excess of the
pregnant body, and both types of bodies incite “horror” because of how easily Esther herself could become one of those bodies—an anxiety which Plath herself shared.

Plath’s preoccupation with fat, pregnant, and overly feminine bodies is evident in her prose, poetry, and journals. During her college years, Plath expresses her conflicting feelings about her body in her journal. In 1951, her freshman year at Smith College, she writes, “even as I long for full breasts and a beautiful body, so do I abhor the sensuousness which they bring,” and “Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. From the moment I was conceived I was doomed to sprout breasts and ovaries rather than penis and scrotum; to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity.”20 As Kathleen Margaret Lant has noted, Plath drew from masculine models of creativity for inspiration, and equated “the fullness of the female body with loss of creative power.”21 Whereas scholars such as Jacqueline Rose and Sarah Juliet Lauro have asserted that Plath’s “words plunge into the body, and writing is a sexual act,” and her “language seems…to insist upon the connection of the body and the word,” when considering Plath’s writing about maternal, fat, and/or overly feminine bodies (especially in writing about her own body), Alicia Suskin Ostriker’s observation that Plath’s obsession with corporeality stemmed primarily from her desire to transcend the body seems more apt: “To understand the connection between physical vulnerability and ironic self-rejection in women poets, it is useful to consider Sylvia Plath, who appears most thoroughly to have internalized the larger culture’s principles of flesh-rejection and aspiration toward transcendence.”22 Being born female is a “tragedy” for Plath because, unlike her male counterparts whose gender is a non-issue, as a woman poet in mid-century America, her gender defined and limited her. The “inescapable
femininity” that Plath resents is only increased by bodily “sensuousness”—a fact which helps shed light on her aversion to corpulence. Letters and journals indicate that Plath subscribed to the same fat hatred that the protagonist of her novel displays. In a May 1952 letter, she brags to her mother, “I have at last gotten thinner, and you should see my tan!”23 In her journals, she frequently (and disdainfully) remarks on fat people she encounters, such as the “fat stocky Germans” on a bus and the “fat tan bulging women” she sees on a beach “rubbing oil into mounds of flesh packed into tight black bathingsuits [sic],” both spotted during a trip to Spain with Ted Hughes in 1956.24 In her 1962 poem “The Fearful,” she depicts a woman who fears fat more than death: “She hates/ The thought of a baby—/ Stealer of cells, stealer of beauty—/ She would rather be dead than fat,/ Dead and perfect, like Nefertit.”25 Here, it is the prospect of the physical transformation caused by pregnancy that instills terror, which mirrors Plath’s own misgivings about becoming a mother.

Journal entries and poems reveal that Plath felt profound ambivalence about motherhood and maternal bodies. While in her journals she often displays a longing to have children, she just as frequently expresses fear and resentment for the limitations they would cause: “Graduate school and travel abroad are not going to be stymied by any squalling, breastfed brats.”26 Additionally, Plath indicates that she considers the pregnant body to be grotesque, even when it is hers; when describing a dream in 1959, she writes, “Sitting with three pregnant women. My mother furious at my pregnancy, mockingly bringing out a huge wraparound skirt to illustrate my grossness.”27 Plath’s ambivalence is evident in her poetry as well. As Lauro notes, Plath “often emphasized the physical presence of pregnancy and the ‘fatness’ of birth.”28 Her depiction of birthing and caring
for a newborn in “Morning Song” presents a bulky, burdened new mother: “One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral/ In my Victorian nightgown.” The description of the speaker’s body as “cow-heavy” suggests that pregnancy and giving birth have animalized the woman, and the detail of the prudish “Victorian nightgown” implies that the physical transformation has desexualized her. Pregnant-woman-as-animal is a trope that also appears in an earlier poem, “Metaphors,” in which the pregnant speaker refers to herself as “a cow in calf” and “An elephant, a ponderous house,” as well as a “fat purse.” The link between animality and pregnancy in Plath’s work emphasizes the dominance of body over mind in her conception of motherhood.

In Plath’s writing, a notable tension exists between a repulsion for maternal bodies and a powerful desire to become one. While Plath often remarks on the grotesqueness of pregnant and/or fat bodies and the limitations caused by motherhood in her journals, she also frequently discusses her overwhelming desire to become a mother. In 1959, shortly before finding out she was pregnant with her first child, Plath writes,

> And for a woman to be deprived of the Great Experience her body is formed to partake of, to nourish, is a great and wasting Death. After all, a man need physically do no more than have the usual intercourse to become a father. A woman has 9 months of becoming something other than herself, of separating from this otherness, of feeding it and being a source of milk and honey to it. To be deprived of this is a death indeed.

In this passage, Plath’s longing—for pregnancy, for merging with and then separating from another, for nurturing that other—is quite evident. Her association of childlessness with death implies that she recognizes the necessity of bodily abjection in perpetuating
the circle of life, even if inhabiting such abjection through pregnancy would transform her body into the “inescapable femininity” that terrifies her. There is evidence of this acknowledgement of the necessity of abjection in her poetry. In “The Munich Mannequins,” Plath writes, “Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children./ Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb.” Here, perfection is sterile and cold—antithetical to the messy, warm, unpredictable maternal body. Similar to “The Fearful,” in Plath’s final poem “Edge,” perfection is only possible in death: “The woman is perfected./ Her dead/ Body wears the smile of accomplishment.” Crossing over the line between subject and “perfected” object through the act of death, the woman has transcended the messy imperfection of bodily abjection, only to, ironically, become the very manifestation of the abject: a corpse. She brings her children with her: “Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,/ One at each little/ Pitcher of milk, now empty,/ She has folded/ Them back into her body as petals.” In this unnatural, perfected form of femininity and motherhood, her children have become serpents and her breasts have run dry. Significantly, the children are pointedly “white” (as is the mother, who elsewhere in the poem is described as a Greek statue wearing a toga), suggesting that their racial whiteness is somehow preserved and protected by the transcendence of bodily abjection. Also, she has absorbed her offspring back into her body, which exemplifies the idea of the abject maternal body as a “devouring body.” It seems that even in her final days Plath understood that there is no escape from abjection, even in death.

Similar to Plath’s longing for pregnancy, Gwendolyn Brooks shares in her autobiographical Report from Part One that her decision to have children was at least partially motivated by her desire for “the Great Experience” of pregnancy. Brooks writes,
“I was happy to have children. I had always intended to have children…because I respected and marveled at and admired my body—I wanted my body to do everything its composition suggested it was supposed to do. I did not want my body to fail. I wanted my body, as well as my mind and spirit, to succeed, to reach an appropriate glory.” Unlike Plath, Brooks exhibits respect and awe for her body, which she places on par with her “mind and spirit.” I propose that the two authors’ divergent views of the body were determined by the very disparate ways that their skin color has been historically coded.

As a white woman, Plath had the privilege of inhabiting the “invisibility” of whiteness. As Richard Dyer discusses in *White*, in Western culture white people “function as a human norm,” as unraced individuals aspiring for physical transcendence, whereas people of color are coded as inescapably embodied others. Although women have historically been aligned with the body, as aforementioned Plath turned to masculine models of creativity and subjectivity, which necessitate a rejection of the body, therefore explaining her desire to transcend her feminine embodiment. Additionally, since whiteness is also constructed through thinness, Plath’s aversion to fat reinforces her racial “invisibility.” While her femininity precluded her from actually inhabiting a body that signifies “a shimmering emblem of the soul’s glory” like her male counterparts, Plath’s subject position as a white, middle-class woman afforded her the privilege of aspiring to it.

Brooks, on the other hand, did not aspire to transcend or deny her corporeality; as a black woman living in mid-century America, however, such an option would not have been available to her even if she had. Regarding the effects of the legacy of slavery on the conceptualization of black bodies in the United States, Hortense J. Spillers draws a
distinction between “flesh” and “body.” Whereas the “body” is a socially constructed entity that belongs to a subject, “flesh” denotes the “captive body” reduced to a “thing,” or object. In other words, the flesh of the captive black body exists outside of ideology, and is denied subjecthood. Since, as Spillers establishes, the cultural imaginary of the United States developed its “American grammar” through the legacy of slavery, modern-day black bodies are, in many ways, still perceived as merely flesh. Consequently, black bodies have historically been construed as primitive, overly sexual, and inferior to white bodies. Furthermore, Darieck Scott argues that “blackness is constituted by a history of abjection, and is itself a form of abjection.” Thus, for Brooks, embracing and celebrating the “glory” of her body becomes a subversive act, since black women have traditionally been “doubly effaced” (to borrow Spivak’s term), their bodies rendered abject by virtue of both their femininity and their blackness.

Specifically, the physical “abjection” that Brooks contends with most frequently in her work (and in her own life) is the cultural coding of black skin (especially dark black skin) as inferior. While she herself did not consider her dark skin unattractive (“I had always considered it beautiful”), she experienced “an almost angry rejection of [her] dark skin by some of [her] brainwashed brothers and sisters.” Thus, colorism and dark-skin-as-abject emerge as reoccurring themes in Brooks’s work, in the way that the abjection associated with maternal and fat bodies shows up in Plath’s writing, perhaps because both issues risk relegating an individual to the margins of a mostly white, male-dominated society—a fate that Plath fears and Brooks challenges.

As a result of the identification of (white) masculinity as the source of intellection, Plath perceives writing and motherhood as mutually exclusive, while Brooks
insists on the continuity between the two practices. In a 1979 interview, Brooks was asked if her writing had ever conflicted with her work as a “wife and mother,” and if she agreed with “Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar*” that being a writer and being a mother was “an either-or proposition.” Brooks replied, “No, I certainly disagree. I feel that writing is part of life…Being a wife and mother and having other interests in life did not do anything except enrich my work—nourish it.”

Significantly, in *Maud Martha*, her only novel (which, like Plath’s, is semi-autobiographical), Brooks’s depiction of a strong, black woman giving birth and celebrating the powerful capabilities of her body contrasts sharply with Plath’s ambivalent portrayals of pregnancy and birth. Given the history of the disenfranchisement of black mothers in the US—first as slaves who had no rights to their children, and thereafter as “second-class citizens” deemed “unfit” as compared to white middle class mothers—Brooks’s portrayal of birth and motherhood in the novel is both poignant and subversive.

As Barbara Christian observes, *Maud Martha* is notable for presenting “for the first time a black woman not as a mammy, wench, mulatto or downtrodden heroine, but as an ordinary human being in all the wonder of her complexity.” Published in 1953, ten years before *The Bell Jar*, *Maud Martha* continues the work that Brooks begins in her poetry collections *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and the Pulitzer Prize winning *Annie Allen* (1950) of representing compelling, complex African American characters living in urban (and often impoverished) settings. While Brooks admits that “[t]here’s fact-meat in the soup, among the chunks of fancy” in *Maud Martha*, she stresses that the book “is not autobiographical in the usual sense.” However, she does confess that the chapter in which her protagonist gives birth “is a fairly good mirror of the birth of my first child”
(192). In this chapter, “a birth,” an at-home delivery devolves into a chaotic, messy scene that underscores the convoluted and inevitable role of abjection in mother/daughter relationships.

For Maud Martha, a character who has always been devalued because of her too-dark skin and plain appearance, the act of giving birth to her daughter becomes an empowering experience. The description of her first signs of labor implies that the experience she is about to undergo will somehow bifurcate her: “On her way back down the squeezing dark of the hall she felt—something softly separate in her.”49 The “squeezing dark of the hall” is suggestive of the birth canal, and feeling “something softly separate in her” reflects Kristeva’s claim that “A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh.”50 Interestingly, in The Bell Jar Esther views this idea of internal separation as evidence that she is unfit for motherhood, when she observes that she is “so unmaternal and apart” as compared to other women (222). For Maud Martha, however, this sensation of apartness or detachment serves as her signal that the journey of motherhood is about to commence.

Ironically, Maud Martha’s own mother turns out to be “unmaternal” and unhelpful during the birth of her granddaughter. When her husband wants to call her mother, Maud Martha resists: “‘Don’t do that, Paul. She can’t stand to see things like this. Once she got a chance to see a stillborn baby, but she fainted before they even unwrapped it. She can’t stand to see things like this’” (91). Notably, “useless mothers” is a theme that appears in both Maud Martha and The Bell Jar, perhaps because both novels are bildungsromans about young women attempting to establish their independence from their mothers. Esther looks for alternative mother figures like Jay Cee, her boss at the
magazine, and Doctor Nolan, the woman who treats her at the mental hospital, because “[her] own mother wasn’t much help” (39). In every scene in which she appears, Mrs. Greenwood is ineffectual and inadequate, and she eventually disappears from the narrative altogether. Likewise, once she arrives at Paul and Maud Martha’s apartment for the birth, Mrs. Belva Brown proves to be every bit as useless as Maud Martha predicted she would be. As soon as her mother arrives, Maud Martha temporarily forgets the pain of labor, “tighten[s] her lips,” and says, “‘Listen. If you’re going to make a fuss, go on out. I’m having enough trouble without you making a fuss over everything’” (95). For both protagonists, a crucial component of their process of individuation and maturation is learning not to count on their mothers for emotional support.

In a scene which Tracy Floreani has referred to as “a graphic blood-and-wailing nod to literary naturalism,” the birth itself becomes a spectacle of abjection. Maud Martha’s labor progresses so quickly that there is not enough time to get her to a hospital, so her mother and Mrs. Cray, a neighbor from down the hall, become her impromptu birthing attendants while Paul runs out to fetch a doctor. Before he goes, Paul stands at the foot of the bed and sees “the creeping insistence of what he thought was the head of the child,” a moment that is reminiscent of Esther seeing “a dark fuzzy thing appear” through the “split, shaven place” between the legs of the anonymous, enormous pregnant woman at the hospital during her visit with Buddy (92). In both instances, witnessing “the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in other to be” instills fear and horror in the viewer. Paul screams, “‘Oh my Lord!...It’s coming! It’s coming!’” and then runs out of the building (after stopping to comb his hair at the mirror, which causes Maud Martha to stare at him in “speechless contempt”) (92). When
Belva arrives, “The baby [is] all ready to spill out,” an observation that emphasizes the gooey fluidity of the abject birthing body (95, emphasis added). Belva and Mrs. Cray stand on either side of the bed, “purposelessly holding a sheet over Maud Martha, under which they peeped as seldom as they felt was safe” (96). Even though both women have given birth before, they cannot bring themselves to look at Maud Martha’s splitting, secreting body. She keeps asking, “Has the head come?”, but no one will check and see (96). In the act of giving birth, the roles have been reversed—the daughter is now the abject maternal body that terrifies the mother. Finally, she feels “as though her whole body were having a bowel movement,” and then the baby slips out (96). Both Belva and Mrs. Cray refuse to look at the baby, as if she were the results of a bowel movement. In this moment, mother and newborn daughter are connected through their shared abjection, yet Maud Martha and her mother are further alienated from each other, which seems to contradict Kristeva’s claim that “in childbirth a mother identifies with her own mother.” Instead, Maud Martha seems to more fully step into herself.

After her baby, Paulette, arrives, Maud Martha feels rejuvenated and empowered. She wonders if she has “ever in her life felt so well?” and “fold[s] her arms triumphantly across her chest” when another female neighbor from down the hall enters the apartment, to whom she brags about her accomplishment and strength: “I just had a baby, and I feel strong enough to go out and shovel coal!” (98). A new Maud Martha has emerged from the birthing experience—one who will not be silenced, and who is stronger because of the presence of her daughter. As Betsy Erkkila writes, in *Maud Martha* “motherhood becomes a form of self-realization registering a movement from silence to voice.”

When Maud Martha hears her baby crying in the kitchen, where the doctor (who arrived
shortly after the birth) is cleaning and dressing her, “a bright delight had flooded through her upon first hearing that part of Maud Martha Brown Phillips expressing itself with a voice of its own” (99). Both a “part” of Maud Martha yet also an individual “with a voice of its own,” Paulette is both self and other—an extension of her mother, but also not her mother.

The moment is similar to Plath’s “Morning Song,” which Lauro has called “a celebration of the child’s birth and her vocalized claim that she is her own self.” Plath begins the poem, “Love set you going like a fat gold watch./ The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry/ Took its place among the elements.” Also a home birth (implied by the presence of a midwife), the scene begins with the baby’s vocal assertion of individuality. However, as in Maud Martha, the border between mother and baby is malleable and ambiguous: “I’m no more your mother/ Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow/ Effacement at the wind’s hand.” Here again we see the language of ethereality, invisibility, and dispersal in Plath’s poetry, revealing the aspirational transcendence of “whiteness.” The child is a mirror emulating the mother from afar; the negative construction of “I’m no more your mother,” however, suggests that the boundaries of this relationship are not clearly and neatly defined. Similarly, in the final moment of “a birth,” when Maud Martha and Paulette apprehend each other for the first time, they appear to mirror each other as separate yet conjoined individuals: “But now the baby was quiet and returned its mother’s stare with one that seemed equally curious and mystified but perfectly cool and undisturbed” (99). Through this experience, both mother and daughter have asserted their voice and discovered each other. Just as Brooks herself wanted her “body…mind and spirit” to “reach an appropriate glory,” Maud Martha views
her transition into motherhood as an experience that necessitates and celebrates every aspect of her being.

In addition to reflecting the personal beliefs and experiences of their authors, *Maud Martha* and *The Bell Jar* underscore racial and class disparities in mid-century America through their different representations of birth. The impersonal, intimidating, antiseptic environment of the hospital delivery room in *The Bell Jar* contrasts dramatically with the intimate domestic space in which Maud Martha delivers her baby.

Esther’s boyfriend Buddy Willard is a student at an unnamed medical school that is probably as prestigious as Yale, his undergraduate institution, which means that it is likely limited to white patients at the time that the novel takes place. In many ways, the treatment of the anonymous, presumably white woman giving birth in the hospital mirrors the treatment of white, middle-class American women by patriarchal society in the 1950s. By “lifting” her body onto a tall table with “high stirrups,” she is quite literally “put on a pedestal,” which imitates the way that white women (especially in the South) have historically been idolized as symbols of beauty, grace, and purity. The medical practitioners attempt to minimize the abjection of her unkempt, secreting maternal body by shaving off her pubic hair and rendering her vagina “lurid with disinfectant,” which reflects the Western construction of the female body “as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid”—a body that requires containment and modification. Finally, by administering “twilight sleep” to the pregnant woman so that she forgets the pain of giving birth, the doctors gaslight the woman, similar to the way that middle-class white women in postwar society were manipulated and misled to believe that their self-worth and happiness—“true feminine fulfillment”—was measurable through their success as
housewives and mothers. Esther points out the misogyny of the drug: “I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn’t groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been” (66). The anonymous, pregnant white woman’s racial and class privilege comes at a cost—she must relinquish her body, autonomy, and memory to receive the protection and approval of the patriarchy.

Birth in Maud Martha, on the other hand, is an entirely female affair that affirms the power and strength of the maternal body and displays Maud Martha’s resilience and independence. Though the couple intended to have the birth occur in a hospital, the last-minute change of venue proves advantageous for Maud Martha, as the experience of essentially acting as her own midwife empowers and enlightens her. Additionally, a hospital for “colored” people in Chicago in the 1940s and 50s had fewer resources than its white counterparts. In this sense, the home birth illustrates bell hooks’s claim that historically “[h]omeplace has been a site of resistance” for African Americans, because it is a “private space where [they] do not directly encounter white racist aggression.” Paulette’s birth takes place in an environment free of the inherent racism and misogyny of the medical industry. In Plath’s and Brooks’s texts, the different representations of childbirth reflect the different ways in which “womanhood is being deployed within the larger American culture.” Thus, whereas the delivery of the pregnant women in The Bell Jar is hidden from sight and controlled by male doctors, her hard work is lauded by others, and the resultant white baby is revered. Maud Martha’s “production of a black child into the postwar cultural economy,” on the other hand, “seems truly devalued by
anyone but herself.” Indeed, even Paul, Paulette’s own father (and the person for whom she is named), seems disappointed in the little black baby that he thinks looks “gray and greasy” and stillborn (97). While the birthing experience is transformative and empowering for Maud Martha, and her daughter beautiful and strong, to the rest of the world Paulette is just another black baby who will discover that “[l]ife was hard”—a thought that passes through her father’s head as he looks down at her little “gray and greasy” body lying on the bed (97).

This detail that Paulette’s newborn body appears “gray” is part of an extended metaphor Brooks employs in *Maud Martha* to convey the abjection involved in living in impoverished, segregated conditions in urban Chicago. The neighborhood in which Maud Martha grows up is marked by “gray and decay,” as is the kitchenette apartment she and Paul move into after their wedding: “The color was gray, and the smell and sound had taken on a suggestion of the properties of color, and impressed one as gray, too” (5, 63). The intermingling of the smells of dozens of bodies inhabiting the tight living quarters of an apartment building is also described in terms of this color: “the smells of various types of sweat, and of bathing and bodily functions…and of fresh or stale love-making…these were gray” (64). The synesthetic quality of Brooks’s “gray” suggests that it pervades every aspect of life in Maud Martha’s community, and using it to describe bodily functions and secretions implies that the term itself is synonymous with abjection. This becomes evident in the chapter “tim,” when Maud Martha examines her uncle’s corpse in its coffin at his funeral and decides that he looks like “a gray clay doll,” which prompts her to declare that “It all came down to gray clay” (25). Kristeva confirms Maud Martha’s observation: “[abjection] is experienced at the peak of its strength when [the
In other words, the horror of abjection is most pronounced in those moments when we realize that, as mortal, messy, secreting bodies, we *are* abject. Brooks’s portrayal of the realities of Maud Martha’s world as gray, or abject, suggests that living black and impoverished in segregated mid-century Chicago means abjection is ubiquitous—a veritable way of life, which exemplifies Darieck Scott’s claim that “blackness-as-abjection” can “be understood or experienced as an aspect of historical experience.”

Significantly (and ironically), becoming a mother helps Maud Martha transcend this grayness. Even though birth and motherhood render her the “abject mother” that her daughter must eventually reject, they also make Maud Martha a stronger, more hopeful individual with a clear vision for her future. This is evident in the final chapter, “back from the wars!”, when “Maud Martha, with her daughter, got out-of-doors”—out of the grayness of the apartment building, and even though the abject sight of veterans missing limbs and “parts of faces” makes her cry, she expresses powerful optimism and gratitude for the good yet to come, because she is about to become a mother of two: “And, in the meantime, she was going to have another baby” (179, 180). For Maud Martha, motherhood becomes the medium through which she can surpass the gray realities of her everyday life.

In Brooks’s and Plath’s writing, maternal abjection induces both fear and hope, while also revealing the ways in which the social construction of race circumscribes female bodies. To Plath, the voluptuous pregnant body signifies a distasteful necessity, for, as Dyer observes, “Whites must reproduce themselves, yet they must also control and transcend their bodies. Only by (impossibly) doing both can they be white.”

To Brooks,
pregnancy, birth, and motherhood can empower black women, who have historically been disenfranchised by white society. In this sense, Brooks’s portrayal of maternal abjection illustrates Scott’s theory that “the abjection in/of blackness endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive power,” which is located “at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call identity, body, race, nation seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary.”

Maud Martha experiences this “power” by fulfilling her artistic yearning to “donate to the world a good Maud Martha” by giving birth to her daughter, who becomes “the offering, the bit of art that could not come from any other” (22). However, as the next section will show, the relationship between mother and daughter can also devolve into a power struggle, as the daughter attempts to break free from the maternal body.

“Bottle in Which I Live”: Mothers, Daughters, and Matricide

Elizabeth Grosz observes that, in the West, the female body has been constructed as “a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order.” Since men have historically been aligned with the “transcendent” mind and women have been coded as “leaking” body, femininity itself has often been perceived as abject. Thus, even when not a pregnant, “maternal” body, female corporeality has the power to “threaten order” and conjure fears of abjection. Additionally, Kristeva contends that the daughter becomes abject through the process of rejecting the mother. Kelly Oliver writes, “But when the female makes her mother abject in order to reject her, she also makes herself abject, rejects herself, and not just temporarily.” The daughter must “reject” the mother in order to enter the symbolic order and the realm of language, yet because she identifies
with the maternal body (and can never properly mourn its loss), “she hates that body, because she cannot be free of it. It is a horrifying, devouring body.” Kristeva argues that this process necessitates a symbolic “killing” of the mother: “For man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation.” If the daughter does not “get rid” of her mother, she carries her around like a “living corpse,” yet in so doing, she kills a part of herself (“For women, matricide is a form of suicide”) and “also makes herself abject.” Hence, the daughter is faced with a double bind when it comes to her relationship with her mother: can’t live with her, can’t live without her, can’t kill her. Plath and Brooks explore and embody this seemingly impossible conundrum in their poetry. For Plath, navigating this tricky triad became a central preoccupation of both her work and her life.

Sylvia and Aurelia Plath’s close and contentious relationship has been well documented and exhaustively explored. In her correspondence with her mother (which Aurelia published as Letters Home by Sylvia Plath in 1975), Sylvia comes across as a dutiful, doting daughter who desperately seeks her mother’s approval and love. Her journals, poetry, and novel, however, are dominated by the voice of a young woman who just as desperately wants to extricate herself from that relationship and unburden herself of the “living corpse” of her mother. Indeed, journal entries indicate that she perceived that separation as an either/or (and life-or-death) proposition: “I wish her death so I could be sure of what I am: so I could know that what feelings I have, even though some resemble hers, are really my own. Now I find it hard to distinguish between the semblance and the reality.” The tension created by these ostensibly oppositional desires
is perhaps most effectively conveyed in “Medusa,” which appears in Plath’s final poetry collection, *Ariel*.

In the poem, the speaker attempts to break free from a suffocating, paradoxical relationship with her mother. The title’s significance is two-fold: while “Medusa” is clearly an allusion to the serpent-headed female monster of Greek mythology, it is also another term for the jellyfish (*medusozoa*). As many scholars have noted, Aurelia, Plath’s mother’s first name, is also a genus of jellyfish (*aurella aulita*). Nephie Christodoulides points out that the original title was “Mum: Medusa,” which leaves little room to doubt that the “unnerving head” of the poem’s title character belongs to Aurelia Plath. The mother/Medusa is portrayed as a devouring maternal body stalking the speaker: “You steamed to me over the sea,/ Fat and red, a placenta.” The originary, physical connection in the womb (“Old barnacled umbilicus,” “a placenta”) still haunts the speaker, and has now been replaced by the “Atlantic cable.” Furthermore, Plath’s conflicting representations of motherhood reflect the ambivalence the speaker feels toward her mother. The religious references in the second stanza (“Red stigmata at the very center”) and third stanza (“Dragging their Jesus hair”) suggest that Medusa’s “stooges” represent Jesus, and therefore the speaker seems to compare her mother to the Virgin Mary. In the fourth stanza, the speaker begins to describe her mother as a jellyfish: “Curve of water upleaping/ To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,/ Touching and sucking.” Later in the poem, the speaker cries, “Off, off eely tentacle!” The mother-as-jellyfish is invasive and clingy, sucking life force out of her daughter. By portraying the mother as Medusa, the Virgin Mary, and a jellyfish, Plath presents a shifting, unstable identity, which imbues the mother with a menacing, unpredictable quality.
Therefore, Kristeva’s insistence that “matricide is our vital necessity” seems justified in “Medusa,” as the speaker, who can “draw no breath,” must save herself by rejecting the mother. She seems to still be trapped in the maternal body, desperate to get out: “I shall take no bite of your body,/ Bottle in which I live.” As Christodoulides has noted, “All Plath’s mother poems delineate the fusion and separation resulting from the struggle to release the abject mother’s hold.” In “Medusa,” this “fusion and separation” constitute the speaker’s central conflict. Though the speaker proclaims “There is nothing between us,” Plath’s use of various literary devices traps the reader in the middle of this mother/daughter relationship, where it becomes clear that the energy existing between the two women is far from “nothing.” Pairs of adjectives like “dazzling and grateful,” “fat and red,” and “dead and moneyless” are sprinkled throughout the poem and create a sense of parallelism. Internal rhymes like “You steamed to me over the sea” and the repetition of “I didn’t call you/ I didn’t call you at all” work together with the parallelism to create a sense of attraction and repulsion that mirrors the inescapable and paradoxical nature of the relationship between daughter and mother. In regards to the final line of the poem (“There is nothing between us”), Barbara Johnson observes, “If there is nothing between the self and the other, there is no space of separation, no difference, perfect oneness…The desire to have ‘nothing between us’ may be a deep wish as well as a disconnection.” Aurelia herself expresses concern about this lack of separation when, in *Letters Home*, she refers to the “psychic osmosis” she experienced with Sylvia. The intense (and unmistakable) push-and-pull that Plath generates in “Medusa” implies that the final line *is* both a “deep wish” and a “disconnection,” thus effectively conveying the double bind of mother/daughter relationships: the daughter must reject the abject mother,
yet that process also entails a “suicide” of sorts, and causes a longing for the lost maternal object that will never be fulfilled.

For Brooks, this double bind is further complicated by racial and class oppression, which limit women’s professional and personal potential in life, thereby trapping both mother and daughter in a seemingly endless cycle of poverty and second-class citizenship. In “Jessie Mitchell’s Mother,” maternal abjection and colorism estrange a mother and daughter pair, and draw them deeper into the hegemonic forces that seek to subjugate and oppress them. From Brooks’s 1960 collection *The Bean Eaters*, “Jessie Mitchell’s Mother” depicts a pregnant mother and her daughter Jessie Mitchell, who appears to be a teenager or adolescent. The poem begins from the daughter’s perspective, as she enters “her mother’s bedroom to wash the ballooning body.”

To the daughter, the mother has neither name nor subjectivity—she is solely defined through her relationship to Jessie Mitchell and has been reduced to a mere “ballooning body,” which illustrates Marianne Hirsch’s claim that “the figure of mother is determined by her body more intensely than the figure of the woman.” Jessie is disgusted by her mother’s swollen body. Brooks gives us a peek into her mind as she enters the bedroom: “‘My mother is jelly-hearted and she has a brain of jelly:/ Sweet, quiver-soft, irrelevant. Not essential./ Only a habit would cry if she should die.’” The jelly imagery is reminiscent of Plath’s portrayal of the speaker’s mother as a jellyfish in “Medusa,” and in *The Bell Jar* Esther also compares her mother to jelly when she visits her at the hospital: “‘They said you called for me.’ She seemed ready to cry. Her face puckered up and quivered like a pale jelly” (172). This description of mothers “quivering” like “jelly” connects to the reoccurring theme of “useless mothers,” in that their lack of solidity and strength renders
them unhelpful and “irrelevant.” Additionally, as not quite liquid and not quite solid, jelly occupies an indeterminate state, similar to the abject, which inhabits the space between subject and object. Therefore, assigning mothers the textural quality of jelly emphasizes their maternal abjection. Jessie Mitchell’s mother is also described as a “stretched yellow rag”—another example of the maternal body as malleable (“stretched”) and abject (“rag”).

It is this “yellow” characteristic of the mother’s body that drives an additional wedge between the two women, as the light-skinned mother perceives herself as being superior to her dark-skinned daughter. The mother, sensing Jessie’s disgust and resentment, apprises her young, thin daughter and considers her inevitable future: “But poor men would bend her, and doing things with poor men,/ Being much in bed, and babies would bend her over./ And the rest of things in life that were for poor women.”

As a poor black woman, Jessie’s future is one full of poverty, struggle, and maternal abjection. These comparisons to the mother’s own life “shattered her heart” and “ate at her bulwarks,” yet they also incite resentment and pettiness: “she, almost hating her daughter,/ Crept into an old sly refuge: ‘Jessie’s black:/ And her way will be black, and jerkier even than mine,’” because she is not “lovely” and light-skinned like her mother. A passage from Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater” regarding a mother’s animosity toward her daughter in early childhood can help shed light on Jessie Mitchell’s mother’s seemingly dichotomous reactions to her daughter’s bleak future: “Never straight-forward, always held back, as if, although the unmanageable child deserved it, the daughter could not accept the mother’s hatred—it was not meant for her. A hatred without recipient or rather whose recipient was no ‘I’ and which, perturbed by such a lack of recipience, was toned
down into irony or collapsed into remorse before reaching its destination.” In other words, the hatred that the mother expresses toward Jessie is actually “not meant for her” but rather for the racist, misogynistic forces that “bend” and subjugate both women—a recipient that is “no ‘I.'” The mother mollifies this hatred by daydreaming about “Her exquisite yellow youth,” a past full of “flowers” and “Triumphant long-exhaled breaths.” She momentarily escapes the abjection of her “ballooning body” and the acrimony she feels toward her resentful daughter by mentally returning to a time when she was admired by men for her light skin and physical beauty—an act which emphasizes the fact that the conflict between the two women is driven more by the outside forces that shape their worldview than by the other.

As aforementioned, Brooks herself was ridiculed for her dark skin (as is Maud Martha), and the idea of society perceiving dark skin as undesirable, or even abject, appears throughout her work. In “Jessie Mitchell’s Mother,” colorism and fear of maternal abjection collide, and neither woman can see that their animosity towards the other is fueled by beliefs that only reify the societal forces that oppress them. Additionally, while Jessie Mitchell rejects her mother and is repulsed by her pregnant body, and the mother “almost hat[es] her daughter,” the fact that the two are engaged in a very intimate act suggests that a connection still exists between the two women, and the daughter’s willingness to “wash the ballooning body” may indicate that she still cares. However, the washing of the mother’s body also implies the ritualistic act of washing a corpse immediately following death. In this sense, the scene we witness in “Jessie Mitchell’s Mother” may be viewed as the aftermath of a symbolic matricide, “the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation,” as Kristeva claims. Having renounced and
rejected the maternal body, Jessie Mitchell enters the room to wash the corpse, even as it readies to bring forth new life. The mother’s ambivalence and recognition of the fate that awaits her daughter signals an awareness of this symbolic separation. Therefore, the visceral resentment that the two women feel toward each other may in fact mask a deeper sadness—a mourning for their lost connection.

**Speaking for the Daughter**

Although a daughter must break with her mother as a necessary component of the process of individuation (or else risk carrying the mother around like a “living corpse,” according to Kristeva), the mother is not bound to the same dictum. Interestingly, the ways in which Plath’s and Brooks’s own mothers insert themselves into their daughters’ narratives—or commandeer them altogether—reveal a reluctance to release their hold over their daughters. Brooks’s mother Keziah has been described as “a quick-walking, careful, Duty-Loving mother” who was incredibly supportive of her daughter’s writing career, just as Aurelia Plath was of Sylvia’s. In *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*, George E. Kent characterizes Keziah as follows: “[Gwendolyn’s] mother was kind but did not exude kindness as her father did. Duty, rectitude—for her mother, these were foremost.” In his preface to *Report from Part One* (which was written and published while Keziah was still living), Don L. Lee writes, “[Gwendolyn] has always had unusual encouragement from her mother, who to this day is still quite active in ‘watching over’ her daughter’s output.” These descriptions of Keziah paint her as an upright, overly attentive, duty-bound woman whose “unusual encouragement” and “watching over” of her daughter’s writing may have mirrored the obsessive involvement of Aurelia Plath. Notably, when
Gwendolyn asks her mother to write down memories to be included in *Report from Part One*, Keziah does so in her daughter’s voice: “I ask my mother to write for me some of her own memories of early Gwendolynian life. And presently she offers, with pride, a Document. In it she presents *herself*, though she pretends that I am speaking.” In the pages that follow, Gwendolyn occasionally inserts corrections and reactions to the things her mother writes in parentheticals, which she signs “G.B.” This linguistic ventriloquism—which Gwendolyn refers to as “An unscheduled partial-portrait of Keziah!”—illustrates how the mother feels that she knows her daughter well enough to speak for her (and the parentheticals indicate that she, in fact, does not).

Aurelia attempted to speak for her daughter in a much more comprehensive and dramatic way with her publication of *Letters Home by Sylvia Plath* twelve years after her daughter’s death. Specifically, Aurelia published her daughter’s letters “as a corrective to what she describes as the ‘raging adolescent voice’ of *The Bell Jar,*” as she compiled the collection after Sylvia’s novel was published in the United States in 1971 (in Plath’s name this time, not under a pseudonym). Jacqueline Rose observes, “The mother therefore intervenes to correct the daughter’s fictionalised self-narrative.” The collection begins with a long introduction written by Aurelia, in which she details her past, her relationship with Otto Plath, and Sylvia and her brother Warren’s childhood. Aurelia’s voice continues to appear throughout the collection when she introduces certain letters, often refuting things that Sylvia writes in her letters. Also, in addition to the inherent one-sidedness of the correspondence (since Sylvia, apparently, did not hold on to her mother’s letters), Aurelia censors the letters, removing “anything at the level of psychic and political life that might jar.” *Letters Home*, therefore, becomes a mother’s
attempt to revise, refute, and occasionally erase her daughter’s voice. The anger that *The Bell Jar*’s publication in the US incited in Aurelia (who, in a letter to the publisher in 1971, writes that the book “represents the basest ingratitude”) was fueled by the fact that the portrayal of Mrs. Greenwood, Esther’s mother, is clearly based on her.95 Barbara Johnson posits that this unveiled, scathing portrait of Aurelia (and of Sylvia’s mental illness) was an intentional attempt on Sylvia’s part to reclaim and assert her own voice: “when Plath realized that her mother expected and appropriated everything she wrote, so that in a sense only something the mother didn’t want would be the daughter’s, she wrote *The Bell Jar.*”96 Janet Malcolm argues that Aurelia’s mission ultimately fails, however, as *Letters Home* only seems to confirm the toxic mother/daughter relationship that *The Bell Jar* suggests: “Instead of showing that Sylvia wasn’t ‘like that,’ the letters caused the reader to consider for the first time the possibility that her sick relationship with her mother was the reason she was like that.”97 Rather than resurrect her dead daughter, or revise her life narrative, Aurelia’s publication of *Letters Home* only leaves their relationship “Overexposed, like an X ray,” just as the speaker of “Medusa” fears. In an ironic reversal of Kristeva’s theory of matricide, Sylvia becomes the “living corpse” that Aurelia cannot release.

In *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, Marianne Hirsch identifies a fundamental problem in texts “written from daughterly perspectives”: mothers often appear as objects, rather than subjects, who have no voice of their own.98 When the daughter does insert her mother’s voice into the narrative, however, it still entails an erasure of the mother, because it is only the daughter’s approximation of her mother’s voice. Hirsch writes, “To speak for the mother…is at once to give voice to her
discourse and to silence and marginalize her.” Yet, what are we to make of mothers speaking for their daughters, as Keziah and Aurelia do? Should we view this as a corrective measure—an example of mothers reacting to daughters who erased or appropriated their voices? Or does the license that these mothers take with their daughters’ narratives show how mothers can still feel a sense of ownership over their daughters well into their adulthood, or even after their death?

The narcissistic overidentification that compels mothers to speak for their daughters, and vice versa, is rooted in the corporeal origins of their relationship. As we have seen, the maternal body is a site of both new life and vile abjection, nurturing love and unspeakable horror. What Plath’s and Brooks’s fictive and autobiographical writing show is that the daughter may never really break with that maternal body entirely, for that “bottle in which [she] lives[s]” continues to compel her to create, to reject that originary connection over and over again until the act of rejection resurrects and reifies the lost maternal object through new life, whether in artistic creation or motherhood, or both. By repeatedly inserting the maternal body into their body of work, by portraying the symbolic matricide that daughters must commit in order to form their own subjectivity, Plath and Brooks contravene the “original matricide” on which our society and culture operate. And by trying to speak for their daughters, by unsuccessfully attempting to reclaim the daughter’s voice as their own, perhaps Keziah and Aurelia exemplify the sorrow of the “essential female tragedy”: the lost connection between mother and daughter.
4 Ibid., 235.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 4.
8 Ibid.
14 Oliver, 60.
17 Ruddick, 191.
27 Ibid., 513.
28 Lauro, 150.
33 Ibid., 272.
34 Ibid.
35 Oliver, 60.
38 Lant, 630.
40 Lant, 625.
42 Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 5. While Scott proposes that blackness “endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive power,” he acknowledges that women “may be too easily shown to have a relation to the abject—this risks simply underlining the structure resulting from the production of normative gender—and thus may be harder to affirm as evidencing some form of power in abjection” (9, 20).


Kristeva, *Portable Kristeva*, 236.

Oliver, 52.


Lauro, 152.


Ibid.


bell hooks, “Homeplace (a site of resistance)” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 41-49, 47.

In “*Maud Martha* Versus *I Love Lucy*: Taking on the Postwar Consumer Fantasy,” Tracy Floreani contrasts Maud Martha’s birth with “Lucy Goes to the Hospital,” the episode of the iconic television show in which Lucy gives birth off-screen. She writes, “In the act of birth, Maud Martha’s and Lucy’s bodies become the sites of cultural reproduction, and each body works as a signifier of womanhood and how womanhood is being deployed within the larger American culture” (200).

Ibid.


Scott, 6.

Dyer, 30.

Scott, 9.

Grosz, 203.

Oliver, 61.


Oliver, 62, 63, 61.

See, for example, Paula Bennett, *My Life a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*; and


76 Christodouliides, 224.


78 Christodouliides, 193.

79 Johnson, 70.

80 Aurelia states, “Between Sylvia and me there existed—as between my own mother and me—a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy” (*Letters Home* 32).


84 Ibid.


86 Brooks, *Selected Poems*, 86.


88 Ibid., 21.

89 Ibid., 15.

90 Ibid., 46.

91 Ibid., 50.

92 Rose, 75.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., 78.

95 Malcolm, 33.

96 Johnson, 89.

97 Malcolm, 34.

98 Hirsch, 15.

99 Ibid., 16.

100 According to Luce Irigaray, “One thing is plain, not only in everyday events but in the whole social scene: our society and our culture operate on the basis of an original matricide.” *Sexes and Genealogies*, 11.

101 Adrienne Rich writes, “The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy” (237).
CHAPTER 3

DAUGHTER ABJECTION AND QUEER TEMPORALITY IN

MARGARET ATWOOD AND TONI MORRISON

In novels written early in their careers, North American literary legends Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison examine how a young fat girl and a young black girl are sexualized, marginalized, and stripped of the protection of childhood innocence by virtue of their fatness and blackness, both in society and in their own homes. Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976) and Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) portray problematic mother/daughter relationships in which the abjection of the daughters’ bodies has a more debilitating effect on the relationship than does maternal abjection. While the mothers in these texts are frequently portrayed as monstrous and distant, the daughters are often depicted as disappointing and inadequate, particularly in their physical appearance. Consequently, in a reversal of the typical psychoanalytical developmental narrative in which maternal abjection compels the daughter to reject and separate from the mother, in *Lady Oracle* and *The Bluest Eye* it is the mothers who reject their daughters, in part because their daughters’ failure to comply with hegemonic, white supremacist beauty ideals threatens their own precarious position in patriarchal society. Atwood and Morrison reveal the ways in which young women considered physically ugly or grotesque (Joan for her fatness, Pecola for her blackness) are precluded from a chrononormative experience of time, because their abjection renders them illegible to
hegemonic progress-driven narratives. In my examination of these postmodern fictions of queer temporality, I will propose that Joan’s and Pecola’s exclusion from chrononormativity may ultimately be read as liberating and subversive.

Both Atwood and Morrison employ postmodernist techniques to convey the indeterminacy and fluidity of the subjectivity of their protagonists, two marginalized female characters who would have typically been erased or stereotyped by the dominant discourse at the time that the novels were written and published. By interweaving the Gothic, the Harlequin Romance, the sentimental novel, and the picaresque, *Lady Oracle* resists generic categorization and utilizes intertextuality as a method for exploring the self. As Eleonora Rao notes, this multiplicity of styles “signifies authorial freedom from any unitary or singular discourse,” which enables Atwood to playfully present Joan’s synchronous “selves” while considering the social constructedness of the fat subject.1 Morrison’s temporal distortion and multiple perspectives in *The Bluest Eye* are postmodern techniques that help to convey the complexities of the self. According to Susan Sniader Lanser, through her use of a double narrative structure, Morrison “change[s] the terms of narrative authority by deconstructing the rationalist humanism that grounds the realist novel and reconstructing authoriality in ways that…exploit the space where a hegemonic postmodern sensibility converges with an African-American politics.”2 In other words, Morrison strategically utilizes postmodern literary techniques to destabilize the historically white, male narrative authority and give voice to disenfranchised black characters, while also avoiding the tendency of postmodern critiques of the “subject” to destabilize or erase the identities of “subjugated people [who] feel themselves coming to voice for the first time.”3 bell hooks has noted that while the
postmodern critique of identity can have debilitating consequences for marginalized individuals, “Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static overdetermined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of the self and the assertion of agency.”

The postmodern elements of Atwood’s and Morrison’s novels work to critique such essentialism by contributing to a mode of character development that draws from the experiences of both the mind and the body. Moreover, the authors choose to center their stories on two very marginalized, subjugated characters: a fat girl and a little black girl.

The choice of these protagonists responds to the cultural moment in which the novels were written and published. While second wave feminists fought for equal rights and bodily autonomy for women in the 1960s and 70s, in many ways the movement also reinscribed Cartesian dualism through its attempts to distance woman from body/nature, where she has historically been relegated. In this sense, by admitting and emphasizing the body in their configurations of Joan’s and Pecola’s subjectivity, Atwood and Morrison anticipate Elizabeth Grosz’s concept of embodied subjectivity, which attempts “to displace the centrality of mind…in conceptions of the subject through a reconfiguration of the body.” Additionally, the authors’ focus on the mother/daughter relationship reflects an ideological shift in feminist thought. As Elaine Showalter has observed, “Hating one’s mother was the feminist enlightenment of the 50’s and 60’s; but it is only a metaphor for hating oneself. Female literature of the 70’s goes beyond matrophobia to a courageously sustained quest for the mother.” As we will see, although the mothers in *Lady Oracle* and *The Bluest Eye* are “monstrous,” they are also depicted as
complex individuals who have suffered their own misfortunes at the hand of patriarchal power, and the daughters long for an emotional connection that their mothers are incapable of giving.

In their depictions of fatness, racism, and colorism, these two novels call attention to marginal societal issues. As bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, and many other black feminist theorists have noted, women of color were largely excluded from both the first and second waves of mainstream feminism.  

The Bluest Eye, which Morrison started writing in 1962 and published in 1970, stands as a potential literary corrective to the absence of black voices in the second wave of the feminist movement. In her 1993 afterward to The Bluest Eye, Morrison shares that the novel was influenced by the 1960s Black Power movement and its emphasis on “the reclamation of racial beauty” in response to the African American community’s “damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze” (210). Questioning why black beauty was not “taken for granted” in the black community, in writing The Bluest Eye Morrison set out to explore “how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (210). Significantly, Pecola is a “very black girl” who is bullied and mocked by other black children for her dark skin.  

Through her depiction of Pecola, Morrison illustrates the devastating effects of internalized racism and colorism.

In Lady Oracle, Atwood responds to a growing awareness of diverse bodies and anticipates early twenty-first century fat studies theories that emphasize the social construction of fat bodies. In a 1984 interview, Atwood explains that Lady Oracle came
about because she “got interested in the connection between mothers and fatness. It is there. It is real.”10 She goes on to describe an Ann Landers column she read in which a mother complains about her “terribly overweight” daughter, who she has “tried to force” to go on diets and offered to buy nice clothing if she would lose weight; Ann Landers responds to the mother by telling her, “you are causing her fatness.”11 Atwood’s approach to depicting a fat female protagonist is indicative of the mainstream second wave feminist attitude toward fat female bodies. On the one hand, while feminists were pushing the boundaries of what women “should” look like, on the other hand “thin feminists often did not see the connections between fat oppression and gender oppression.”12 The fat acceptance movement commenced in New York City in 1967 (and NAAFA, or the National Association to Aid Fat Americans, was formed two years later) but remained a fringe feminist cause until the National Organization for Women (NOW) adopted a resolution regarding size acceptance more than twenty years later.13 At the time that Lady Oracle was written, fat was frequently framed as a deliberate choice rather than as a naturally occurring physical difference. For instance, Susie Orbach’s Fat is A Feminist Issue (which was published just two years after Lady Oracle) asserts that feminism understands fat to be “an attempt to break free of society’s sex stereotypes,” and that becoming fat “can thus be understood as a definite and purposeful act.”14 Therefore, at first glance, Atwood’s portrayal of Joan’s weight gain as a conscious rebellion against her draconian, thin-obsessed mother would seem to simply reify the cultural stereotypes surrounding fat in the 1970s. However, by also framing fat as a permanent state or identity category that Joan cannot escape (even after she loses weight and begins lying about her fat past), and as a method for understanding her subjectivity as polymorphic
and fluid, Atwood forecasts fat studies and corporeal feminist theories that reconfigure the primacy of the body and consider the ways in which identity is socially and rhetorically constructed.

In *Lady Oracle* and *The Bluest Eye*, Atwood and Morrison respond to the cultural moment by rendering the effects of misogyny, fatphobia, and racism corporeally—specifically, on the bodies of two young women. In what follows, I show how racist and sexist beauty standards cause two mothers to abject their daughters, thus denying them the protection of childhood innocence and influencing the development of their subjectivity. Additionally, the mothers’ treatment of their daughters queers their experience of temporality, illustrating the ways in which fatness and blackness oppose teleological narratives of development. Finally, I propose counter readings of both texts by arguing that the protagonists’ preclusion from chrononormativity may ultimately be read as liberating and redemptive.

**Monstrous Mothers and Disappointing Daughters**

In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood presents a toxic mother/daughter relationship that reconfigures the role of abjection between the two women. Joan explains that she is “the embodiment of her [mother’s] own failure and depression, a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize.” This paradoxical description of Joan—embodied, yet an “edgeless cloud”—foreshadows the liminal, fluctuant connection between the body and mind that both she and her mother, Frances Delacourt, possess. Frances’s repulsion at the sight of Joan’s fat body and consequent rejection of her daughter subvert Julia Kristeva’s theories regarding
the role of maternal abjection in mother/daughter relationships, while Joan’s inability to release her psychic hold on her mother (which manifests in the continued haunting of Frances’s “astral body”) illustrates the Kristevan concept of the daughter’s struggle to separate from the “maternal Thing.”

According to Kristeva, abjection “is a precondition of narcissism,” a necessary developmental stage prior to entering the symbolic realm of language.\textsuperscript{15} As “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite,” abjection both threatens and constitutes our identity as it unsettles the boundaries between self and other, subject and object.\textsuperscript{16} Our initial experience of abjection is the maternal body. Kristeva writes, “The abject confronts us…with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling.”\textsuperscript{17} Because the maternal body represents the first and greatest threat to the division between self and other, we reject it yet forever mourn that lost connection. Since, as Kelly Oliver notes, “both the subject and society, which depend on the Symbolic order, depend on the repression of this maternal authority,” the maternal body, “the body without borders,” becomes a “horrifying, devouring body” to the child in order to facilitate her separation from her mother.\textsuperscript{18}

However, this separation is not simple, especially for daughters. As Nancy Chodorow has observed, symbiosis and primary identification between mothers and daughters tend to be stronger than that between mothers and sons, and consequently a mother often experiences her daughter “as an extension or double” of herself.\textsuperscript{19} Additionally, within the heterosexual psychoanalytic framework of development, a
daughter must transfer her primal, erotic desires for the mother to the opposite gender, while a son need only transpose his longing to another female. Regarding this transition, Oliver writes, “Whereas the son splits the mother in order to unify himself, if the daughter splits the mother, she splits herself.” Yet, the daughter must separate from the mother, or else risk “carr[ying] the maternal Thing with her locked like a corpse in the crypt of her psyche.” This double bind haunts Joan in *Lady Oracle*, as she contends with the emotional effects of being rejected by her mother at a young age for her abject body.

With the novel’s first line, “I planned my death carefully,” Atwood introduces a protagonist who carefully crafts fictions in both her real life and in the romance novels that she publishes under a pseudonym. We soon learn that Joan’s “death” (which she fakes to escape the consequences of her various hijinks throughout the novel) is not her first, when she relates the tale of her first “self”—a lonely little fat girl who is emotionally abused by her mother. Frances names her daughter “after Joan Crawford,” a fact which proves ironic on two counts: first, being named after someone else causes Joan to ceaselessly wonder, “Did she give me someone else’s name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own?”, a question which becomes a sort of self-fulling prophecy, as Joan assumes different names and different personae while navigating her adult life (38). Secondly, “Joan Crawford was thin” and Joan Delacourt is not, a difference that becomes “one of the many things for which [her] mother never quite forgave [her]” (39). Indeed, Joan’s failure to live up to Frances’s (and, by extension, society’s) thin ideal ignites the central tension of the novel: “The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body” (66).
Frances works diligently to inculcate her daughter with hegemonic beauty ideals, teaching Joan early in life that her fat body is repulsive and shameful. She stops taking pictures of her daughter at the age of six, which, Joan believes, “must have been when my mother gave up on me…perhaps she no longer wanted my growth recorded. She had decided I would not do” (39). This indicates that Frances rejects her daughter when she is still quite young. Joan’s experience with her first (and final) dance recital illustrates the ways in which Frances works as an agent of the patriarchy and reveals how Joan herself internalizes the lessons her mother tries to teach her. Frances enrolls Joan in a dance class because “she hoped it would make [her] less chubby,” but as the recital grows near she becomes mortified at the prospect of her daughter appearing in public wearing a butterfly costume with a tight bodice and short skirt (39). Her mortification is so great that she alerts Miss Flegg, the dance teacher, to Joan’s appearance in the costume; in response, Miss Flegg dresses Joan in a large, shapeless teddy bear costume with a sign around her neck that reads “MOTHBALL,” denying her the opportunity to dance as a beautiful butterfly like she had dreamed. Looking back on the event, Joan recalls the butterfly costume as follows:

The problem was fairly simple: in the short pink skirt, with my waist, arms and legs exposed, I was grotesque. I am reconstructing this from the point of view of an adult, an anxious, prudish adult like my mother or Miss Flegg; but with my jiggly thighs and the bulges of fat where breasts would later be and my plump upper arms and floppy waist, I must have looked obscene, senile almost, indecent; it must have been like watching a decaying stripper. (42)
Here, young Joan’s fat not only makes her “grotesque” but also sexualizes her, thereby denying her the presumed innocence and protections of childhood by insinuating that she is complicit in her own oppression. Also, this retrospective glance reveals that adult Joan has adopted her mother’s views regarding physical aesthetics; indeed, the novel is full of examples of Joan denigrating her former fat body and the bodies of others (for instance, when she moves to London and is disappointed by the “large number of squat people with bad teeth”) (141). As a child and adolescent, however, Joan rebels against her mother’s attempts to mold her into an “appropriately” thin, attractive woman.

Joan’s rebellion through compulsive eating and sartorial defiance intensify her mother’s resentment. Similar to the concerned mother in the Ann Landers column that inspired Atwood to write *Lady Oracle*, Frances leaves diet booklets around the house for Joan to find and tries to bribe her with offers of pretty new clothes if she loses weight. Joan responds by consuming “another Mars Bar or a double helping of french fries. I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes. I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining-room table” (66). Moreover, although Frances encourages Joan to use her clothing allowance to “buy clothes that would make [her] less conspicuous,” Joan seeks out “clothes of a peculiar and offensive hideousness, violently colored, horizontally striped” (83). The sight of Joan “in a new lime-green car coat with toggles down the front, flashing like a neon melon” finally succeeds in bringing Frances to tears, which serves as proof of Joan’s power, “my only power” (84). As aforementioned, this conceptualization of weight gain as intentional rebellion reflects a dated feminist view of fat, which, though progressive for the 1970s, would be considered problematic by modern day feminist and fat activists. However, as Joan observes, when
she was fat, “nobody regarded being fat as a misfortune; it was viewed simply as a
disgusting failure of will,” which makes Atwood’s portrayal of weight gain as a
conscious act of resistance seem subversive (86). Additionally, it imbues Joan with
agency and a sense of purpose. However, her compulsive eating is also rooted in
existential anxiety: “I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic. Sometimes I was afraid I
wasn’t really there, I was an accident; I’d heard her call me an accident. Did I want to
become solid, solid as stone so she wouldn’t be able to get rid of me?” (74). Joan’s
descriptions of herself as formless (i.e., “a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter”) and
her expressed desire for solidity seem fueled by Frances’s view of Joan as an abject body
that disgusts her.

In a reversal of Kristeva’s concept of maternal abjection, I propose that Frances
and Joan’s relationship serves as an example of what I have termed “daughter abjection,”
or the mother’s rejection of the daughter’s body in response to some perceived physical
blight that reflects poorly on the mother’s ability to mold her daughter in compliance with
Western patriarchal expectations of feminine beauty. In addition to ceasing any
photographic evidence of Joan’s growing (fat) body at the age of six, Frances also avoids
physically touching her daughter. Joan explains, “On her hands, in her hair, these were
the metaphors my mother used about me, despite the fact that she seldom touched me”
(85). Their physical estrangement is so severe that Joan has no sense memory of her
mother’s touch: “I could always recall what my mother looked like but not what she felt
like” (85). In fact, Frances refuses to touch her daughter’s skin even while wearing
gloves: “My mother didn’t hold me by the hand, there were her gloves to think of. She
held me by the arm or the back of the collar” (85). To Frances, Joan represents the abject,
both in the sense that she is repellent, disgusting, and shameful (she tells Joan, “If I
looked like you I’d hide in the cellar” [84]), and in the way that she threatens the
boundary between self and other. As her daughter, Joan may be viewed as an “extension”
of her mother—a fact which terrifies Frances, since Joan’s failure to adhere to hegemonic
expectations of femininity is so very epic that it could endanger her own position within a
phallocentric society. Kristeva writes, “if [the abject] is a jettisoned object, it is so from
the mother,” and Oliver elaborates: “The child is this jettisoned object, the waste
violently expelled from the mother’s body.”24 This figuration of the child as “waste” from
the mother’s body supports my concept of “daughter abjection,” as it opens up space
within Kristeva’s theory of maternal abjection to consider how the child can become the
phobic “object” that facilitates the necessary separation from one entity into two.

Although Joan walks out of her mother’s house at the age of seventeen and never
returns nor speaks to her again, she cannot shake her psychic connection with Frances,
which takes the form of an “astral body.” As a teenager, Joan accompanies her Aunt Lou
to a gathering of Spiritualists, where she meets the psychic and medium Leda Sprott.
During the service, Leda receives an “urgent message” from a woman who fits Frances’s
description and who is “very unhappy about something…. I get the name Joan” (106).
When Joan informs her that her mother is still alive, Leda replies that “it must’ve been
her astral body,” which she defines as a body that everyone possesses (in addition to their
“material body”) that can “float around by itself, attached to you by something like a long
rubber band” (107). Initially, Joan brushes off this disturbing idea, remarking that she
“didn’t like the thought of my mother, in the form of some kind of spiritual jello, drifting
around after me from place to place” (107). Later, when Joan is living in London, she
opens her apartment door one day to discover her mother’s astral body standing on her rug, “crying, soundlessly, horribly” (172). Unbeknownst to Joan at the time, her mother has just died in Canada. Joan resents the intrusion: “Why couldn’t she keep the goddamn thing at home where it belonged? I pictured my mother floating over the Atlantic Ocean, her rubber band getting thinner and thinner the farther it was stretched” (172). This description of a mother haunting her daughter across the Atlantic Ocean is reminiscent of Sylvia Plath’s poem “Medusa,” in which the connection between the speaker and her mother is an “Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable”; the mother is “always there,/Tremulous breath at the end of my line,” and she “steam[s] to me over the sea.” In both Plath’s poem and Atwood’s novel, the psychic connection between mother and daughter is imagined as a type of invisible cord that can cross oceans…whether the daughter likes it or not.

Also similar to Plath’s “Medusa” is the way that Joan envisions her mother as a monster. On the “good days” of their relationship during Joan’s childhood, Frances lets Joan watch her “put on her face” in front of a triple mirror that reflects the front and both sides of her face (62). Joan has recurring dreams about the experience: “In the dream, as I watched, I suddenly realized that instead of three reflections she had three actual heads, which rose from her towelled shoulders on three separate necks. This didn’t frighten me, as it seemed merely a confirmation of something I’d always known,” which she refers to as “the secret that I alone knew: my mother was a monster” (63). Later, as an adult, Joan continues to feel haunted by her monstrous mother: “All this time I carried my mother around my neck like a rotting albatross. I dreamed about her often, my three-headed mother, menacing and cold” (213). This image of Frances as a three-headed monster
could be read as an allusion to Cerberus, the three-headed dog from Greek mythology that guards the entrance to Hades, who admits new souls but blocks any from returning to the world. Similarly, Medusa, the mythological creature that Plath positions as the mother in her poem, prevents those who venture onto the island where she lives from leaving by turning them into stone with her gaze. These mythological metaphors, along with the image of the invisible cord connecting mothers and daughters, suggest that the mother is a monstrous guardian, entrapping the daughter and preventing her from moving forward in her life.

However, just as the story of Medusa (a victim of rape transformed into a monster by a jealous goddess) is more complex than it at first seems, the adversarial dynamic between Frances and Joan is actually rooted in an ancient longing that originates in the body. In “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other,” Luce Irigaray explores the pre-Oedipal connection between mother and daughter. Through the voice of a daughter addressing her mother, the piece depicts the painful, visceral processes of separation and individuation. The daughter is a reflection of the mother (“I came out of you, and here, in front of your very eyes, I am another living you”), and the mother depends on that reflection to confirm her existence (the daughter asks, “Was I not the…guardian of your nonexistence?”). Like Frances “putting on her face,” the mother in Irigaray’s essay sits in front of a mirror and “strip[s] off [her] disguises”: “You take off your face of a mother’s daughter, of a daughter’s mother. You lose your mirror reflection. You thaw. You melt. You flow out of your self.” Here, disconnected from both sides of her matrilineage, the mother loses her solidity and her sense of self—the “menacing and cold” mother “melts.”
Therefore, perhaps in *Lady Oracle* it is not just a matter of a maternal “monster” guardian versus a daughter who is a “huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter,” but rather a daughter who also serves as “guardian of [her mother’s] nonexistence,” and a mother suffering the same existential crisis as the daughter. Indeed, the recurring appearance of Frances’s astral body (both when she is alive and after she is dead) conveys the liminality and fragility of her embodied identity. Frances’s stalking and haunting of Joan through her astral body illustrates Irigaray’s idea of the mother “wandering without identity, discharging upon [the daughter] this endless, and at each step excruciating, wandering.” Perhaps the two women are, as Irigaray posits, “living mirrors” of each other, which Joan realizes at the end of the novel when she tries to finally let her mother go: “How could I renounce her? She needed her freedom also; she had been my reflection too long” (330).

Frances’s astral body is ultimately a gift for Joan, as it facilitates a connection and understanding between the two women that they are never able to achieve while Frances is alive. While Atwood does not go to great lengths to humanize Frances, she does imply that her life has not been a happy one. She has a loveless relationship with Joan’s father, Phillip, who is away at war until Joan is five years old, and is silent and distant once he returns. Joan overhears a conversation between her parents in which she learns that she is the result of an unintended pregnancy and a reluctant marriage, and later she speculates that Phillip may have caused Frances’s death by pushing her down the cellar stairs while she was drunk. Though Frances had devoted her life to her family, “had made her family her career as she had been told to do,” “nobody appreciated her,” and her husband was “ashamed of her,” refusing to move back “to Rosedale, that stomping ground of respectable Anglo-Saxon money where his family had once lived” (177). Born into a
lower socio-economic class than Phillip and possessing little education or employable skills, Frances had to leverage her physical beauty to achieve stability and social mobility in a patriarchal society, which explains her fixation on policing Joan’s appearance. After her death, however, Frances is able to express her longing for a connection with her daughter through her astral body: “‘What do you want?’ I said, but she didn’t answer. She stretched out her arms to me, she wanted me to come to her; she wanted us to be together” (329). Once she has dropped her material body, Frances is also able to shed the ideological imperatives that compelled her to surveil her daughter’s appearance, and all that remains is a primal desire to reunite with her child. This gives Joan the opportunity to discover that she actually did love her mother, and that Frances had “never really let go of me because I had never let her go” (330). These realizations help Joan begin to heal and construct an identity that is separate from her mother.

Although Atwood does give Frances a few redeeming moments in the novel, she is primarily depicted as a cold and distant monster, and for the most part we are left to infer how she became so monstrous. In *The Bluest Eye*, on the other hand, Morrison presents a more complex, multi-layered mother character in her portrayal of Pauline Breedlove. Whereas in *Lady Oracle* Joan serves as an unsettling reflection of her mother and “guardian of her nonexistence,” in Morrison’s novel Pauline tries to ignore and repress the ways in which her daughter reflects her, and instead seeks proof and validation of her existence through the white family for whom she works. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows how institutional racism and Western beauty ideals transform Pauline Breedlove into a monstrous mother—a transformation that has devastating consequences for her young daughter, Pecola.
Unlike Frances, whose backstory is only presented in brief glimpses, Pauline receives an entire chapter, in which we learn the history of her bodily infirmities, her relationship with her husband Cholly, and her exposure to racist ideology and debilitating conceptions of feminine beauty. Pauline’s section represents a formal departure from earlier chapters in the novel, as it alternates between the voice of an authorial narrator and Pauline’s internal monologue. The chapter’s opening line, “The easiest thing to do would be to build a case out of her foot,” positions Pauline on the defensive; the rest of the chapter offers evidence that attempts to explain how a mother could become so monstrous (110). Regarding this chapter, Susan Sniader Lanser writes, “All of this information overdetermines [Pauline’s] role in Pecola’s tragedy and makes it impossible to assign causes to effects or to delineate clear boundaries of responsibility.” Moreover, as a poor black woman with a lame foot and a worthless, abusive husband living in a bitterly racist society, Pauline emerges from this chapter almost as much of a victim as her daughter. Indeed, Morrison traces the transmittal of the toxic, damaging beliefs regarding race and beauty from mother to daughter as she explores the effects of those beliefs on them both.

Pauline learns white supremacist beauty ideals from both black and white sources. When she and Cholly move from Kentucky to Ohio in search of opportunities, the Northern black women that Pauline encounters in her new town deride her for not straightening her hair, or wearing high heels and cosmetics. As Maxine Leeds Craig notes, prior to the 1960s, “Hair straightening was a beauty technique used by black women as they made the transition from rural poverty to urban promise.” This method for pursuing “upward mobility” is rooted in racist ideology, as it aims to make African
American hair look less “ethnic” and more white. At first, Pauline tries to assimilate to her new surroundings, but high heels “aggravated her shuffle into a pronounced limp,” her attempts at making up her face “came off rather badly,” and the sudden loss of her front tooth due to a cavity compels her to “settle[] down to just being ugly” (117, 118, 123). However, this is no easy task, since her time spent at the “picture show” while pregnant with her first child (which she refers to as “the onliest time I be happy”) watching beautiful white actors live charmed lives dictates her aesthetic preferences and introduces her to the world of unattainable (white) physical beauty, one of “the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought” (122). She applies these same aesthetic standards to her assessments of both herself and her daughter, which results in self-loathing and resentment.

In Pauline’s eyes, Pecola enters the world abject. Prior to her daughter’s birth, Pauline feels good about her second pregnancy and experiences a sense of connection with her unborn child: “I used to talk to it whilst it be still in the womb. Like good friends we was” (124). This pre-lingual, pre-Oedipal communication between mother and baby exemplifies Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic chora, which is the developmental stage prior to language, prior to signification, that begins in the womb and lasts until an infant is about six months old. Kristeva writes, “the chora, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality.” In other words, the chora is experienced as sheer fluidity, timelessness, and connectedness. When mother and daughter are engaged in this bodily, visceral connection, Pauline “felted good about that baby” (124). Significantly, however, her feelings change after the birth. Though she promises to “love it no matter what it looked like,” she seems to change her
mind once she sees her daughter, who “looked like a black ball of hair” (124). In the semiotic chora, before the baby enters the realm of signification and language, she can be a loving companion, a “good friend,” but once Pauline sees her outside of her body and in the world, she rejects her, perhaps because some part of her recognizes that there is no place for Pecola in the realm of the Symbolic—there is no method for signifying an ugly, dark black girl in a society that refuses to see her.

Moreover, Pauline projects her “contempt for her own abjected blackness” onto Pecola from the moment she is born. Even though Pecola is a “right smart baby,” Pauline decides right away that she is a disappointment: “But I knewed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (126). Notably, Pauline is reminded of her “abjected blackness” shortly before she gives birth to Pecola, when the white doctors in the hospital animalize her and dismiss her pain: “When he got to me he said now these here women you don’t have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses” (124). Therefore, she associates Pecola’s birth with the doctors’ dehumanization. Additionally, seeing Pecola for the first time is an uncanny experience for Pauline:

Anyways, the baby come. Big old healthy thing. She looked different from what I thought. Reckon I talked to it so much before I conjured up a mind’s eye view of it. So when I seed it, it was like looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl. You knows who she is, but she don’t look the same. They give her to me for a nursing, and she liked to pull my nipple off right away. (125)

Even after seeing her baby and learning its sex, Pauline continues to refer to Pecola as “it” (“So when I seed it”), which suggests that she objectifies her daughter, as the doctors
have just objectified her. The sight of Pecola is unsettling, both familiar and unfamiliar, like “looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl…but she don’t look the same,” which resonates with Freud’s description of the uncanny as that which “proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed.” In this instance, it is the abject, “the ‘object’ of primal repression,” that has resurfaced for Pauline in the figure of her newborn baby girl, who reminds her of her own abjection and invisibility in a society where “the black female body has not been interiorized as ideal but localized as thing.” Also, Pauline views the relationship as adversarial from the very beginning, as evinced by the fact that her first comment about Pecola after noting how uncanny she looked is that “she liked to pull my nipple off right away” during their first nursing encounter. For Pauline and Pecola, daughter abjection frames the very foundation of their relationship.

Pauline’s fetishization of white beauty alienates her from her daughter and traps her in an impossible fantasy. Her “education in the movies” contorts her sense of aesthetics, teaching her that the flawless white actors she sees on the “silver screen” represent the pinnacle of both “absolute beauty” and virtue, and since those standards are impossible for her to achieve, she “collected self-contempt by the heap” (122). Her job as a domestic servant for the affluent, white Fisher family places her in close proximity to the “beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise” that she so craves (127). Their small, young daughter with “corn yellow” hair is like a living baby doll, and caring for her becomes one of Pauline’s obsessions: “Then she brushed the yellow hair, enjoying the roll and slip of it between her fingers” (127). When Claudia MacTeer, who serves as one of the novel’s narrators, and her sister Frieda seek out Pecola at the Fisher home one day, a brief altercation reveals the extent to which Pauline has transposed her maternal affection from
her own daughter to her little blonde ward. Claudia is furious when she overhears the Fisher girl call Pauline “Polly,” indicating a level of both disrespect and intimacy, because “even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove” (108). After Pecola accidentally tips over a hot berry cobbler, splashing most of the juice on her legs and burning herself, Pauline enters the room and begins beating her: “In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication” (109).

Pauline’s monstrous reaction to the accident (and her obliviousness to her daughter’s pain) contrasts remarkably with the maternal way that she soothes and consoles “the little pink-and-yellow girl,” who begins to cry after witnessing the violent outburst and demise of her precious pie (109). This mother/daughter exchange throws into sharp relief Pauline’s rejection of Pecola, whose daughter abjection momentarily ruptures the fantasy of whiteness and white beauty in which Pauline engages during her time with the Fishers.

Just as Pauline fetishizes the doll-like Fisher girl for her delicate white features and silky blonde hair, Pecola learns to value and desire white aesthetics. When she stays with the MacTeers after her father “burned up his house” and put his entire family “outdoors,” Pecola becomes obsessed with a “blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup” and takes “every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (19, 23). Pecola wants to “handle” the “face”—similar to how Pauline enjoys bathing the Fisher girl and brushing her hair—as she drinks “three whole quarts” of milk, which is itself a symbol of white purity and supremacy. Pecola again seeks to fondle and consume white beauty when she purchases Mary Janes from a sundries shop:
Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane.

Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (50)

For Pecola, the candy becomes a communion wafer, a Holy Eucharist that has the power to purify and transmogrify. Like her mother, Pecola fetishizes symbols of unattainable white beauty: “Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane” (50). She has clearly internalized and adopted the same racist belief system regarding physical aesthetics that her mother learned while watching those movies—so much so that she recognizes that the only way to secure her mother’s affection would be to somehow magically comply with those same unrealistic expectations: “It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes…were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different…maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too” (46). Therefore, “Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes” (46). Pecola knows that, as a dark black girl with “small eyes set closely together under [a] narrow forehead” and “straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met,” she is a disappointing daughter to a mother who worships her antithesis, “the little pink-and-yellow girl” (38).

As aforementioned, in her afterword to the 1993 edition of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison explains that the impetus for writing the novel came from the disconnect she witnessed between the 1960s Black Power movement and its imperative to celebrate all the ways that “Black is Beautiful,” and the internalized racism that she witnessed in the
African American community. She shares the story of overhearing an elementary school
classmate express a desire to have “blue eyes”; Morrison writes, “ Implicit in her desire
was racial self-loathing” (210). As J. Brooks Bouson (and many other critics) have
observed, The Bluest Eye “points to the pernicious effects of internalized racism.”
Moreover, intraracial discrimination features prominently in the novel; Pecola is often
targeted by her peers for having very dark black skin, like when a group of boys surround
her after school and chant “Black e mo Black e mo,” an act motivated by both
internalized and intraracial racism: “It was their contempt for their own blackness that
gave the first insult its teeth” (65). In her essay “Back to Black: Ending Internalized
Racism,” bell hooks explains the inherent hierarchy that colorism causes in the African
American community: “to be born light meant that one was born with an advantage
recognized by everyone. To be born dark was to start life handicapped, with a serious
disadvantage.” For the Breedlove family (which, ironically, “breeds” self-loathing
rather than “love”), their dark skin and ethnic facial features provide proof of their
“unique” ugliness, a belief that they subscribe to wholeheartedly: “No one could have
convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly” (38).

Claudia and Frieda are also acutely aware of the advantages of light skin; when a
“high-yellow dream child” named Maureen Peal begins attending their school, the sisters
envy and resent her (62). Notably, when Maureen is introduced to Pecola, she asks,
“Wasn’t that the name of the girl in Imitation of Life?”, which she explains is a film about
“this mulatto girl [who] hates her mother cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the
funeral” (67). This allusion to Imitation of Life seems intentionally ironic, given the fact
that in The Bluest Eye it is the daughter who is rejected by her mother for being “black
and ugly,” rather than the mother who is rejected by the daughter. While Claudia and Frieda recognize that “Maureen Peal was not the Enemy,” and that “[t]he Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us,” they are unable to name this “Thing,” and they are powerless to stop it (74). This unnamable, unstoppable force exists in “the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world” (74). In other words, the forces of internalized and intraracial racism are systemic, pervasive, and invisible.

One method Morrison uses to convey just how deep racist ideology regarding beauty ideals resides in the collective unconscious is through white baby dolls. Early in the novel, Claudia scoffs at Frieda and Pecola as they bond over their shared obsession with Shirley Temple, and the exchange inspires her to reflect on her fierce and long-standing hatred of dolls. Gifted a “big, blue-eyed Baby Doll” every year for Christmas, Claudia is repulsed by the symbol of white beauty and compulsory heterosexuality (“I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood”); she feels compelled to “dismember it” in an attempt to figure out why “all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured” (20). Given her family’s poverty and Pauline and Cholly’s neglectful and abusive parenting, Pecola likely never received a doll for Christmas, but based on her adoration for the Shirley Temple cup and the Mary Janes, there is little doubt that she would have indeed “treasured” such a gift. Morrison’s decision to position white baby dolls as the epitome of beauty for young girls appears to allude to the Clark Doll Experiment of the 1940s, in which African American psychologists Kenneth Clark and Mamie Clark gave young
black children the option to choose between black dolls and white dolls, and the subjects overwhelmingly chose the white ones.\textsuperscript{45} Notably, colorism seemed to have been a factor in the children’s choices, as the results showed that the tendency “to prefer the white doll and to negate the brown doll…is most pronounced in the children of light skin color and least so in the dark children.”\textsuperscript{46} In addition to its racial implications, Morrison’s emphasis on dolls in \textit{The Bluest Eye} underscores the ways in which young girls are taught hegemonic expectations regarding femininity and beauty through childhood toys, and encouraged to transpose their longing (for friendship, for connection with others, etc.) to those toys. Atwood also portrays this gender conditioning in \textit{Lady Oracle}; when Joan complains to her mother that she is lonely and does not have anyone to play with, Frances instructs her to “Play with your dolls” (75). Joan finds this solution unsatisfying: “I did play with them, those crotchless frizzy-haired plastic goddesses, with their infantile eyes and their breasts that emerged and receded gently as knees, unalarmng, devoid of nipples. I dressed them up for social events they never attended, undressed them again and stared at them, wishing they would come alive” (75). Like Pecola’s Mary Janes and Shirley Temple cup, Joan’s dolls provide both instructions regarding feminine aesthetics and the fantasy of interpersonal connection.

For both Pecola and Joan, the daughter abjection that compels their mothers to reject them is reinforced by society. In other words, everything around them confirms that they are abject for their blackness and fatness. From the ways that they fail to mimic the aesthetics of dolls, to the bullying they receive from classmates, to the prejudicial attitudes of their teachers, Joan and Pecola have no reason to doubt that their mothers are correct. Interestingly, a 1962 study entitled “Obese Adolescent Girls: An Unrecognized
‘Minority’ Group?” examined similarities between the effects of fat prejudice and racial discrimination. The authors argue that just as the “Negro person never forgets racial discrimination” and “some Negro people…straighten their hair, lighten their skin and have a social status system based in part on lightness of skin color,” obese girls also adopt “dominant group values” because they are constantly reminded of their fatness. Thus, “like other minority groups, the obese adolescent girls accept social beliefs regarding obesity.” While problematic by today’s standards, this study offers a glimpse of dominant beliefs in mid-century Western culture—i.e., that fatness and blackness are generally undesirable traits. Moreover, the two traits are linked, as fat stigma and the thin ideal were, in part, born from a desire to delineate between the “savage,” excessive black body and the “civilized,” disciplined white body. In Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia, Sabrina Strings notes that “the fear of the black body was integral to the creation of the slender aesthetic” among white people. Therefore, Frances’s obsession with Joan’s weight may also be fueled by anxieties about racial identity and social class. This fear of fat black bodies is also present in The Bluest Eye. After Frieda is sexually molested by her parents’ boarder and overhears a neighbor pronounce that she has been “ruined,” she explains to Claudia that “ruined” is being like “the Maginot Line,” a fat black prostitute that lives in an apartment with two other prostitutes above the Breedloves’ home. Claudia considers her sister’s future: “An image of Frieda, big and fat, came to mind. Her thin legs swollen, her face surrounded by layers of rouged skin. I too begin to feel tears. ‘But, Frieda, you could exercise and not eat’” (101). Here, fatness is a fate worse than being sexually assaulted, because it would distance Frieda even further from achieving the “high-yellow” ideal of
someone “civilized” and thin like Maureen Peal. Also, Claudia’s suggestion to “exercise and not eat” frames fatness as a choice (or, at least, as potentially avoidable), which is also how Atwood portrays fat in *Lady Oracle*. Ironically, Pecola’s prayer for blue eyes implies that she believes her ugliness is also potentially optional. Though not framed as a “choice” per se (since she has to pray for the eyes and ask Soaphead Church to help answer her prayer), Pecola’s desire for God to alter the color of her eyes so that she can be beautiful and loved suggests that she has internalized the racism passed down to her by her mother to such a degree that she believes her abjection is, in some way, her fault.

Framing fatness and blackness as traits that Joan and Pecola believe are somehow within their control insinuates that the daughters are responsible for their own abjection when, in actuality, systemic societal problems are the root cause of their oppression and abuse. Frances obtains and maintains her precarious social position by adhering to patriarchal expectations of feminine beauty (which demand thinness), and those same expectations compel her to surveil and suppress her daughter’s body. Pauline learns from blacks and whites alike that her blackness is ugly and her body is an object, and these beliefs inform her parenting (or lack thereof) of Pecola. Both mothers reject their daughters because they believe they must, or else risk being rejected themselves by a misogynistic and racist society that considers their primary job as mothers to be conforming their daughters to its dictates. Significantly, Frances’s and Pauline’s rejections of Joan and Pecola have profound consequences for their daughters’ subjectivity. As the next section will show, Joan’s and Pecola’s daughter abjection fragments their sense of self and queers their experience of time.
“The Formal Beginning of My Second Self”: Temporality, Subjectivity, and Abjection

After Aunt Lou dies, Joan discovers that she stands to inherit some money, but she can only claim her inheritance on one condition: she must lose one hundred pounds. Initially she resists, feeling like Aunt Lou’s final message is a betrayal or rejection (“Did it mean she hadn’t really accepted me for what I was, as I thought she had…?”), but once she recognizes that her aunt offered her the money “to escape from [her] mother,” she decides to overlook the cruelty of her aunt’s condition and “reduce” (117). Joan engages in a cycle of disordered eating—sometimes starving herself through a diet of “fat pills,” appetite-suppressing candies, crackers, and black coffee, other times binge eating and then purging after each “relapse”—and watches her body “dwindle” (118, 119). Rather than pleasing her mother, as Joan had always expected, her weight loss causes Frances to become “frantic” and erratic. She leaves cakes and pies around the house for her daughter to find, and Joan realizes that “in a lesser way she had always done this” (119). In their final confrontation, Joan confesses that she intends to move out as soon as she turns eighteen and has lost enough weight to claim her inheritance; Frances responds with “an expression of rage, which change[s] quickly to fear,” and says, “‘God will not forgive you! God will never forgive you!’” right before plunging a paring knife from the kitchen counter into Joan’s upper arm (120). Joan walks out, loses the final pounds while living in a boarding house, claims her money, and then moves to London. Regarding this transition, Joan pronounces, “This was the formal beginning of my second self” (135).

Ever since figuring out at the age of six that her mother believes she “would not do” in her current form, Joan adopts and sheds personae based on the environments in
which she finds herself—a process that Atwood reflects through the different writing styles that she mimics in the novel. As Eleonora Rao observes, by parodying the Gothic, the Harlequin Romance, Victorian poetry, concrete poetry, and the Picaresque, Atwood “probes notions of unity in generic classification,” and Joan’s use of different identities destabilizes the notion of a unified self.52 However, I would argue that *Lady Oracle*’s “polyhedric protagonist” vacillates between different personae not out of a desire to subvert or rebel against societal norms or static conceptions of the self, but rather because of the dramatic and sustained ways that her mother abjected her throughout her childhood.53 Joan’s daughter abjection splinters her subjectivity, ultimately altering her experience of temporality.

As aforementioned, abjection has the power to both create and destroy an individual’s identity, as it is comprised of the forces against which we establish our selfhood, yet it is also a primal part of us that constantly threatens to dismantle the division between subject and object. Therefore, if fatness is abject, then it becomes one of the forces against which subjectivity is formed and delimited. Growing up with a mother who constantly reminds her of her fatness, Joan learns that abjection is *who she is*, not simply aspects of physicality to suppress or avoid. This is why her former fat body continues to haunt her, even long after she loses weight: “The outline of my former body still surrounded me, like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant superimposed on my own” (213). Like her mother’s astral body, the specter of Joan’s fat body continues to insert itself into her life at inconvenient moments, like when she encounters a childhood acquaintance who once bullied her: “Wads of fat sprouted on my thighs and shoulders, my belly bulged out like a Hubbard squash…Like a
virus meeting an exhausted throat, my dormant past burst into rank life” (228). Joan is unable to repress the abject because she formed her subjectivity in a state of abjection, rather than against it. Significantly, Kristeva conceives of the abject as timeless and eternal; she describes it as “a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered,” and “That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present.” Therefore, living with a selfhood constituted by (or, at least formed in) abjection traps Joan inside a temporal loop.

Many fat studies scholars have identified the ways in which living in an “obese” body in a fatphobic society queers a fat person’s experience of time. Rachel Fox argues that “the chronotypes created by narratives of personal transformation through weight loss” are internalized by fat dieters and thus “hold [them] hostage to a future that will never materialize while simultaneously making other ways of experiencing time unthinkable.” In other words, the compulsory drive for a perfect, thin future makes it impossible to fully inhabit the present, or to acknowledge the fat, imperfect past. In her article “Against Progress,” Fox examines how the history of hegemonic progress narratives in Western culture—which justify violence, oppression, and deprivation in the present by striving for an imagined utopian future—compel fat people to “evacuate” the present by consigning the “fat, abject body” to the past (even while still living in that body) and reside in “an imaginary state of future achievement,” where they will have the thin, socially acceptable body that they have been instructed to want. In “Slender Trouble,” Lucas Crawford argues that “there is, rhetorically, no such thing as a fat present.” He elaborates: “When fat bodies can be permitted only if they can pass ‘on-the-way-to-thin’ (LeBesco 2004: 95), it is not possible to say that anyone is fat; fat people are launched into the future anterior tense in which we ‘will have been’ fat.” Finally, in
“Temporarily Fat: A Queer Exploration of Fat Time,” McFarland et al. draw on Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of chrononormativity (which Freeman defines as “the use of time to organize individual bodies toward maximum productivity”) to show how “heteronormative temporal arrangements regulate fat bodies.” In other words, fat bodies are positioned outside of temporal markers of heteronormative time—marriage, pregnancy/parenthood, and death/inheritance—because fat subjects are expected to lose weight before engaging in the first two markers (or are prevented from engaging in them entirely), and their fat is perceived as the cause of their death (as it also potentially threatens the lives of others, like their children). In *Lady Oracle*, Frances reinforces this idea by framing Joan’s fat as something that will preclude her from a heteronormative future: “Besides, who would think of marrying a mothball? A question my mother put to me often, later, in other forms” (47).

After Joan loses weight and begins to live as “her second self,” her relationship with both time and her body begin to change. Prior to her crash diet, her fat makes her appear much older than she actually is: “I was quite fat by this time and all fat women look the same, they all look forty-two” (78). During her diet, when her body is in transitional state, she begins living in the “imagined state of future achievement” that Fox describes, in which she focuses on a future where she “will have been fat.” The night that she leaves her parents’ house after her fight with Frances, she stands in front of the mirror in her hotel room and apprises her still dwindling body “much as a real estate agent might examine a swamp, with an eye to future development” (135). Here, Joan’s body is an unfinished commodity, one that has little value in the present but may become lucrative in the future. Once she loses all of the weight, she experiences a sense of rebirth and feels
compelled to create a new fictional past for herself: “it was like being born fully grown at the age of nineteen: I was the right shape, but I had the wrong past” (139). When Arthur, a love interest who eventually becomes her husband, sees an old picture of her with Aunt Lou, he points to Joan in the photograph and asks, “‘Who’s the other one? The fat one?’” (87). Joan, who has “devised an entire spurious past for this shadow on a piece of paper,” lies to Arthur about the fat girl in the photo, and then feels like she has betrayed “[her] own shucked-off body” (88). Joan can never admit her fat past into the present, yet she can never fully inhabit the present because she is constantly haunted by her fat past while simultaneously striving to achieve a utopian future of thinness. Early in her marriage, she realizes that Arthur also lacks a unified selfhood, but his selves are linear and chronological, whereas hers are concurrent: “But I soon discovered there were as many of Arthur as there were of me. The difference was that I was simultaneous, whereas Arthur was a sequence” (211). As a (former) fat woman, Joan experiences her past, present, and future selves all at once, yet she never fully inhabits any of them. Margaret Hass writes, “For the fat subject, selfhood itself is deferred to the future.”60 In the various aliases and identities Joan creates, we see her perpetually deferring selfhood while remaining trapped inside a temporal loop.

Joan learns to cope with this splintered subjectivity and queer temporality by writing, a restorative act that also sustains her financially. Using a pseudonym, she publishes Gothic romance novels and eventually pens an avant-garde poetry collection that brings her notoriety and a modicum of success. As a young fat girl, Joan escapes the misery of her home through her vivid imagination, and as a fat adolescent and teenager she befriends thin girls with her outgoing personality, and by earning their trust she gains
“a thorough knowledge of a portion of [her] future audience” of romance novel readers (91). For Joan, who “always found other people’s versions of reality very influential,” escapism becomes a way of life that leads to a career: “when it came to fantasy lives I was a professional” (160, 215). Interestingly, in The Bluest Eye, Pecola also escapes her circumstances by retreating into her mind, but her fate is far more tragic.

The consequences of Pecola’s daughter abjection reach an appalling climax in an encounter with her father. When Cholly comes home in a drunken state one Saturday afternoon, he happens upon his daughter standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes. The sight of her “whipped” posture and her back hunched over the sink inspires a “sequence” of emotions: “revulsion, guilt, pity, then love” (161). It is notable that his initial reaction to his daughter is revulsion; unlike Pauline, who is repulsed by Pecola because she reminds her of her own abjected blackness, Cholly’s aversion grows out of his inability to communicate and connect with his daughter, whose “misery was an accusation” of his shortcomings as a father (161). For Cholly, the vast chasm that lies between them combined with the pitiful sight of Pecola hunched over the sink becomes the experience of encountering the abject: “His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit” (162). However, his nausea is quelled when Pecola scratches the back of her calf with her toe, a gesture that reminds Cholly of his first encounter with Pauline. He then rapes his eleven-year-old daughter on the kitchen floor. She faints when he is done, and the sight of her lying on the floor incites revulsion once more: “Cholly stood up and could only see her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her” (163). Both Cholly and Pauline abject their daughter because she
serves as a mirror of their own abjection; whereas Pauline sees her failure to embody Western ideals of beauty reflected back to her, in Pecola Cholly sees his impotence and powerlessness as a black man living in a white, racist society. Neither of them see their daughter.

Indeed, Pecola’s invisibility emerges as a reoccurring theme throughout the novel, as the different characters she encounters either see through her or project their own shortcomings and fears upon her. Mr. Yacobowski, the racist shopkeeper from whom she buys the Mary Janes, is unable (or unwilling) to see the young black girl standing before him: “At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper…see a little black girl?” (48). When a bully named Junior lures Pecola into his home to show her his “kittens,” he gets jealous when his mother’s cat becomes affectionate towards her; after he violently throws the cat at Pecola, it hits the radiator and dies. When Geraldine, his mother, returns home and discovers the carnage, Junior blames it on Pecola. Geraldine assesses Pecola in an instant, and in her she sees all of the low-class, “nigger girls” that she has been avoiding her entire life: “The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between” (87, 92). She then calls Pecola a “nasty little black bitch” and banishes her from her house (92). Significantly, both Mr. Yacobowski and Geraldine experience their exchange with Pecola as occurring outside of linear time. The former apprehends Pecola at “some fixed point in time and space” which unsettles and arrests his vision: “Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover” (48). The latter views Pecola as representative of the “waste,” or the
abjection, that constitutes the “end of the world,” “the beginning,” and everything in between. In other words, Pecola is both alpha and omega, everywhere and nowhere, and entirely abject.

In “Too Late: Racialized Time and the Closure of the Past,” Alia Al-Saji argues that racism is a social pathology that can result in “aberrations of affect, embodiment and agency that are temporally lived.”\(^6\) Drawing from Frantz Fanon’s 1952 *Black Skin, White Masks*, Al-Saji examines how the racialization of the past—configured as a white, open, “civilized” past positioned against a black, closed, “colonized” past—in hegemonic linear progress narratives affects the lived experiences of black people in the present. She coins the term “racialized time” to describe the “temporal structure of racialized experience.”\(^6\) In essence, the “historico-racial schema” (Fanon’s term for “the unconscious racial imaginary”) relegates black people to a black past, in which they were colonized, oppressed, and viewed as inferior, thereby limiting their lives in the present.\(^6\) Al-Saji explains that, for black people, the “past is no longer lived at a distance, as past, but is experienced as a fixed and overdetermining dimension of the present.” Pecola experiences this sense of racialized time when she is under the gaze of the white shopkeeper: even though “All things in her are flux and anticipation,” to Mr. Yacobowski “her blackness is static and dread” (49). In that moment, he can only see her blackness (which Pecola understands causes his “distaste” for her) and the stereotyped, overdetermined black past that he associates with her skin color. Therefore, even though young Pecola is full of “flux and anticipation,” her dark skin color consigns her to an imagined, anachronistic past that is “static.” Helen Ngo builds on Al-Saji’s work and argues that if blackness is rooted in a past that is positioned as happening prior to
“civilized” time, then whiteness may be viewed as “temporally present, or even, futurally directed.” Interestingly, this conception of whiteness as “futurally directed” aligns with the idea of fat temporality, where the fat subject is always projected into an imaginary future of thinness and heteronormative progress—a similarity that supports Sabrina Strings’s argument regarding the association between the compulsory thin ideal for white women and anxieties about racial identity. However, since the fat subject can never really achieve that utopian future, nor inhabit the present (since, as Crawford notes, there is “no such thing as a fat present”), Joan, like Pecola, keeps getting pulled into the past. Significantly, though, for Pecola there is no future, imagined or otherwise.

Pecola wishes for blue eyes because she recognizes that no future exists for ugly black girls: “As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people [i.e., her family]” (45). James Bliss refers to “Black reproduction” as “a mode of reproduction that is not reproductive futurism,” and observes the “queer capacity of Blackness to reproduce without being productive.” In other words, because Pecola is a black, unattractive girl, society deems her invisible and unimportant, and therefore even if she did reproduce, neither she nor her children would be part of the teleological futurity that Lee Edelman critiques through his concept of reproductive futurism. As José Esteban Muñoz points out, Edelman’s theory centers on a “monolithic figure of the child that is indeed always already white,” which leaves out children like Pecola: “The future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity.” Furthermore, black and brown children are often precluded from the category of “childhood.” Jacob Breslow argues that “childhood was (and continues to be) multiply, incoherently, and ambivalently distributed
to black bodies.” Breslow contends that childhood can be deadly for African Americans living in a racist society because of its “ambivalent and discrepant stickiness to black bodies, and its positioning of blackness within differing relations to futurity and temporality.” That is, unlike white children, who are usually insulated and protected by virtue of their age, black children are not always seen as children with the same potential for a productive future, and therefore are not entitled to the same treatment as their white counterparts (Breslow cites studies that show that police officers, juries, and doctors often assume black children are older than they actually are). We see this dynamic at work in The Bluest Eye when word gets out that Pecola is pregnant with her father’s child. People in the community believe that “[s]he carry some of the blame” for the pregnancy, even though she is only eleven years old (189). Additionally, they believe that there “[o]ught to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly” (190). In other words, there should be a law about reproducing ugliness, not a law prohibiting incest or child rape. Here we see the differential application of childhood protections, even in the black community, which serves as another example of the power of internalized racism. Whereas the blonde, “pink” Fisher girl is worthy of safety and care, Pecola is not, even when her own mother is the one making that determination.

In Lady Oracle, as an adolescent and teenager Joan also appears older than she is to the rest of the fatphobic society in which she lives. For instance, the Italian immigrant cook at a café where she works wants to marry her, and she believes it is because “I was the shape of a wife already, I was the shape it took most women several years to become” (97). However, even though society perceives Joan as older because of her fatness, her white privilege insulates and shields her. In the novel, this protection is portrayed as a by-
product of her fat (in other words, strange men do not harass her in public because they see her body as off-putting), but I would argue that a black or brown fat girl would likely have a very different experience. As Pecola’s tragic end shows, when an abject black girl is precluded from the present (i.e., childhood), denied a future (per Bliss and Muñoz), and consigned to a static, anachronistic past (i.e., racialized time), her only other option is to exist outside of time.

The fate of Pecola’s baby seems to confirm Bliss’s claim that blackness has the queer capacity to “reproduce without reproducing.” When, as a result of her father’s rape, Pecola’s body does attempt to reproduce, “the baby came too soon and died”; shortly thereafter, in the final line of the novel we learn that “it’s much, much, much too late” to help Pecola (204, 206). Both “too soon” and “too late,” Pecola’s life exemplifies Al-Saji’s point that racialized time and Fanon’s work exposes “a sense of…temporal discontinuity, the experience of coming too late to a world that appears overdetermined and far too real.”

Because others see Pecola as existing outside of linear time, she eventually sees herself that way, too. After the traumatic experience of the rape and pregnancy, Pecola “step[s] over into madness” (206). In the final chapter of the novel, Pecola and “a friend” (who is clearly imaginary) engage in a conversation that Vanessa Dickerson refers to as “a self-reflexive dialogue of italicized and roman print that constitutes a fleshing out of double consciousness.” Through this conversation we learn that Pecola is now so abject in her mother’s eyes that Pauline will not even look at her anymore: “Ever since I got my blue eyes, she look away from me all the time. Do you suppose she’s jealous?” (195). Cholly’s rape and Pauline’s rejection destabilize Pecola’s subjectivity and queer her experience of temporality; in essence, daughter abjection
pulverizes her sense of self and time. Also, as Angela Connolly observes, “severe trauma and shame can lead to a loss of the sense of temporality.” 72 Indeed, we are told that Pecola spends the rest of her days “walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear” (204). Because of both the trauma and shame caused by her childhood experiences, Pecola forever resides in a place outside of linear time, responding to a rhythm that only she can hear. Significantly, for Morrison, this psychotic break is the result of racism. In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” she writes, “The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis.” 73 Morrison positions Pecola as the vulnerable scapegoat of a racist society, and because of the result—psychosis and a fragmented self—The Bluest Eye can be viewed as a cautionary tale about the psychological consequences of both internal and external racism.

However, there is a way in which these two tales of daughter abjection can be read as recuperative as well. In Extravagant Abjection, Darieck Scott proposes that “blackness-as-abjection,” which is typically perceived as disempowering, actually has the ability to empower black subjects. 74 The source of this power lies in the very nature of abjection itself; since the abject can both create and destroy subjectivity, blackness-as-abjection exists beyond the “ego-protections” of “identity, body, race, nation” and can therefore rupture those constructs. 75 Significantly, Scott argues that the trauma experienced by virtue of being black and abject can offer “a liberating escape from linear time.” 76 In other words, escaping chrononormativity through abjection can be a freeing experience. He notes that representing the “body-psyche nexus” where blackness and
abjection is “experientially lived” is difficult, “because the marvelous fictions of I, self, linear temporality, or coherent perspective on which narrative usually depends are in the state of abjection awash in those fictions’ opposites.” That is, the concepts of a unified self and linear time are actually falsehoods, which blackness-as-abjection reveals, yet portraying this dynamic is difficult since narratives depend on such fictions. However, I would argue that this is exactly what Morrison sets out to accomplish in The Bluest Eye. Through her use of postmodern literary techniques, Morrison attempts to lay bare the myth of a coherent self. She accomplishes this not just through Pecola, but also in the ways that she portrays the paradoxes and complexities of characters like Cholly and Pauline. The entire Breedlove family is “awash” in abjection, and one way that Morrison conveys this is by rendering them as subjects in a constant state of “becoming” who never cohere as unified selves. Pecola, of course, provides the most dramatic example of the effects of blackness-as-abjection on subject formation. In her afterword to the novel, Morrison notes that Pecola “is not seen by herself until she hallucinates a self” (215). Thus, it takes “liberating” herself from linear time to finally recognize herself as a subject, as a beautiful being worthy of love and friendship. While abjection is the root cause of Pecola’s greatest traumas, Scott’s theory of the empowering nature of blackness-as-abjection, coupled with Morrison’s interpretation of Pecola’s mental breakdown, offers us a potentially recuperative counter-reading of a postmodern classic.

As for Joan, fatness-as-abjection—and the queer temporality it causes—may also be viewed as potentially liberating and empowering. Like Pecola, Joan experiences a sense of double consciousness as a result of her daughter abjection: “But hadn’t my life always been double? There was always that shadowy twin, thin when I was fat, fat when
I was thin, myself in silvery negative, with dark teeth and shining white pupils glowing in the black sunlight of that other world” (245). However, unlike Pecola, Joan possesses the ability to see this multiplicity as an asset that can possibly enrich her life: “But not twin even, for I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many” (245). In their article about heteronormative temporal arrangements and fat, McFarland et al. conclude by positing, “In failing, subjects find an escape from hegemonic norms that seek to discipline subjectivities. Falling outside of a chrononormative timeline, fat subjects are well positioned to critique the norms upon which their exclusion is predicated.”78 In other words, failing to adhere to heteronormative temporal markers of progress may be liberating for fat individuals, as such failure opens up more possibilities for the formation of the self. Indeed, at the end of the novel Joan seems ready to reinvent herself again, after confessing the truth about her faked death to a reporter who finds her hiding out in Italy. She decides to stop writing romance novels, the “Costume Gothics” that she has been publishing under a pseudonym, and considers switching to science fiction, even though “[t]he future doesn’t appeal to me as much as the past, but I’m sure it’s better for you” (345). Joan may never escape the temporal loop caused by her fat past, but perhaps she would not even want to, since she has learned to harness the multiplicity and fluidity that result from a subjectivity formed in a state of abjection and apply them to creative ends.

The mother/daughter relationships at the center of The Bluest Eye and Lady Oracle exemplify both the potential tragedy and the possible empowerment of a selfhood formed in abjection. In addition to revealing the ways in which patriarchal ideals
regarding physical aesthetics can invade and poison the mother/daughter relationship, these texts also illustrate the dangerous ways that discriminatory cultural beliefs about fatness and blackness can sexualize and victimize children, denying them the presumed innocence that is typically afforded their thin and white peers. However, perhaps the fact that Joan and Pecola are precluded from a chrononormative experience of temporality should give us hope, for a life lived outside of the institutionalized, regimented machine of linear time, in which human bodies are organized and driven to “maximum productivity,” may provide the spaciousness and freedom to truly “see” a self (as Morrison suggests of Pecola), and possibly even learn to love and embrace the self that they see.79
4 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 4.
17 Ibid., 13.
20 Oliver, 61.
21 Ibid., 63.
23 While Joan Crawford is now considered an icon of abusive, tyrannical motherhood, it was not common knowledge that she was a terrible mother at the time Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* was published in 1976. Crawford’s adopted daughter published her famous memoir *Mommie Dearest* in 1978, which means that Atwood’s reference to Joan Crawford is likely benign and unintentionally ironic.
24 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 73; Oliver, 60.
27 Ibid., 63.
29 Irigaray, 66.
30 As Orbach observes, the mother/daughter relationship “is bound to be difficult in a patriarchal society because it demands that the already oppressed mothers become the teachers, preparers and enforcers of the oppression that society will visit on their daughters” (22).
31 Overall, Atwood’s portrayal of Frances reflects Marianne Hirsch’s claim that in the 1970s, “the prototypical feminist voice was, to a large degree, the voice of the daughter attempting to separate from an overly connected or rejecting mother” (Hirsch, 164).
32 In *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Hirsch examines 19th and 20th century texts by women writers to illustrate how the voice of the mother is so often erased, marginalized, or appropriated. Significantly, however, she argues that the feminist tradition of black American women writers of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s features mothers prominently and “in complex and multiple ways.” Hirsch specifically points to Toni Morrison as a writer in this tradition who creates complex, fully developed mother characters, even in novels told from the perspective of daughters (Hirsch, 176).
33 Morrison would later remark that the dual voices in this chapter “are extremely unsatisfying to me,” because she felt that they failed to capture “the feminine subtext that is present in the opening sentence” of the novel (i.e., “Quiet as it’s kept”) (*The Bluest Eye*, 215).
34 Lanser, 131.
36 Ibid.
42 Bouson, 55.
46 Clark and Clark, 610.
47 While the subjects of the study included girls from “the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish religions,” they excluded “one French-Canadian girl and one Oriental girl” from the experimental group, so the subject group was entirely comprised of white girls. In a 1960s pre-intersectionality society, it is clear that the authors of the study did not consider how interlocking systems of oppression might affect their findings. Lenore F. Monello and Jean Mayer, “Obese Adolescent Girls: An Unrecognized ‘Minority’ Group?”, American Journal of Clinical Nutrition 13 (1963): 35-39.
48 Ibid., 36, 37.
49 Ibid., 36.
50 While this direct comparison of obesity and racial discrimination (without any consideration of intersectional factors) would be problematic in modern day society, I argue that this study helps speak to the general climate during the decades in which both novels were written.
52 Rao, 133.
53 Ibid., 144.
54 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 8, 4.
56 Ibid., 222.
58 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 3
63 Ibid., 5.
68 Ibid., 475.
69 Ibid., 484.
70 Al-Saji, 9.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 11.
77 Ibid., 13.
78 McFarland et al., 143.
79 Freeman, 3.
CHAPTER 4

CARRYING THE MOTHER IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT

AND JAMAICA KINCAID

The novels of Caribbean-American authors Edwidge Danticat and Jamaica Kincaid share a preoccupation with the ways in which women are affected by colonialization and imperialism. In particular, mothers and daughters serve as the central focus in Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). Both *bildungsromans* that trace their protagonist’s relationships with problematic and/or absent mother figures, the two novels depict the effects of intergenerational trauma as they explore the blurred boundaries between mothers and daughters in the process of identity formation. As products of their countries’ violent, colonial pasts, the women in these texts experience the difficulty of achieving and maintaining bodily and psychical autonomy when mothers and the motherland seek to suppress their identities and personal liberties. Sophie (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*) and Xuela (*The Autobiography of My Mother*) both attempt to reclaim and embrace the abjection of their feminine bodies and to establish a positive connection to their matrilineage while simultaneously asserting their own subjectivity, yet various obstacles—both material and psychological—threaten their success. In these two post-colonial novels, institutional misogyny and imperialist ideology infiltrate the relationships between mothers and daughters. While the tone and circumstances of their relationships with their mothers are
quite different, both Sophie and Xuela carry their mothers around like “living corpses,” unable to commit the symbolic matricide that Kristeva claims is necessary for individuation, in part because they never know their mothers as fully “living.” However, an exploration of a paradox at the heart of feminist object-relations theory will reveal that such pathological conceptions of the mother-daughter relationship are rooted in phallocentrism, and that for two subaltern women living in societies that seek to subjugate and silence them, “carrying’’ the mother may be a form of resistance, a necessary component of subject formation, and an act of love.

Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a story of diasporic mothering. The action of the novel bounces back and forth between New York City and Haiti, the protagonist Sophie Caco’s country of origin. Raised in Haiti by Tante Atie, her mother’s sister, Sophie grows up receiving limited information about her mother, Martine, from her aunt and Grandmè Ifé. Sophie only knows her mother through recorded messages on cassette tapes that they receive monthly from the United States and a picture of Martine that sits beside Tante Atie’s bed. The picture gives Sophie nightmares, wherein Martine chases her through a field: “When she caught me, she would try to squeeze me into the small frame so I could be in the picture with her. I would scream and scream until my voice gave out, then Tante Atie would come and save me from her grasp.” When her mother summons her to Brooklyn at the age of twelve, her nightmares intensify: “She opened her arms like two long hooks and kept shouting out my name. Catching me by the hem of my dress, she wrestled me to the floor. I called for Tante Atie as loud as I could” (28). During her first night in Brooklyn, Sophie discovers that her mother is also haunted by
“horrible visions” in her sleep when she must wake Martine from a violent nightmare (48).

It is only after Sophie has lived in New York for a few months that she learns the truth about her origin: Martine was raped by a member of Haitian dictator Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s Tonton Macoutes (a state-sponsored terrorist organization) at the age of sixteen, and left Haiti for the United States after Sophie’s birth in an attempt to ensure her safety and preserve her sanity. However, Martine relives the experience of the rape at night while she sleeps (“it’s like getting raped every night,” she says), and her mental health continues to deteriorate throughout the course of the novel (190). Sophie and Martine’s shared problem with nightmares foreshadows a central theme in Danticat’s text: trauma is passed down through the Caco martrilineage—a fact that Sophie discovers as an adult once she realizes that her mother’s “nightmares had somehow become [her] own,” when she starts having dreams of “a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl” (193).

The other great trauma that Martine passes down to her daughter is the Haitian ritual of “testing.” She explains to Sophie that by regularly inserting her pinky finger into her daughter’s vagina to check for a hymen until she is married, a Haitian mother fulfills “her responsibility to keep her [daughter] pure” (61). Grandmè Ifé performed the same “test” on her daughters, and it traumatized them both; Atie “used to scream like a pig in a slaughterhouse,” and Martine considers the experience to be tantamount to the trauma of being raped: “The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day” (60, 170). When Martine discovers that eighteen-year-old Sophie has been secretly dating Joseph, their next-door
neighbor who is the same age as Martine, she begins testing her. As many scholars have noted, the act of testing is a form of sexual abuse; in what Carole Sweeney refers to as “the familial domestic simulacrum of rape,” Martine effectively “rapes” her own daughter by sexually violating her against her will. Perhaps equally disturbing is the Haitian folktale about the “Marassas” that Martine tells Sophie while she tests her. The “Marassas” are two inseparable lovers who, Martine explains, “were the same person, duplicated in two,” and who loved each other deeply, in part because they were indistinguishable from the other (84). She tells Sophie that the “love between a mother and daughter is deeper than the sea,” and then threatens that her relationship with Joseph could destroy that perfect, symbiotic love: “You would leave me for an old man who you didn’t know the year before. You and I we could be like Marassas. You are giving up a lifetime with me” (85). In essence, Martine desires to erase or subsume Sophie’s subjectivity so that they can live together in narcissistic bliss. Clare Counihan has argued that the act of testing combined with Martine’s expressed wish for Sophie to be her “twin lover” is “a literalization of homoerotic desire.” However, I would argue that both the testing and Martine’s choice to tell Sophie the Marassas story during the sexual abuse “literalize” the blurred boundaries that exist between mothers and daughters in identity formation. As Kristevan scholar Kelly Oliver has noted regarding a child’s process of separating from the mother, “The boundaries between body and not-body are controlled by the mother.” In other words, it is the mother who delineates the physical boundaries between herself and her child. Here, Martine, who was absent from Sophie’s childhood, tries to assert her claim over her daughter’s body and identity by literally trespassing a bodily boundary (i.e., her vagina). Even though the justification Martine gives for the act
is fundamentally rooted in patriarchal oppression and surveillance (that is, the cultural expectation that women remain virgins for their future husbands), the Marassas folktale that accompanies the violation suggests that maternal possessiveness and narcissistic overidentification also motivate her actions.

Examining Martine and Sophie’s history through the lens of feminist psychoanalysis may help to shed light on Martine’s abusive behavior, and on the codependent relationship that she develops with her daughter. As aforementioned, after her birth Sophie does not see her mother again until she is twelve years old. Consequently, the aunt who raises her provides the nurturing and care typically associated with the mother. Prior to the age of twelve, Sophie only knows her biological mother in the semiotic chora phase of development, which, Kristeva explains, is “no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated.”7 This is the stage prior to language, prior to signification, when an infant feels inseparable from her mother, which lasts from our time in the womb until about six months of age. The chora is experienced as sheer fluidity, timelessness, and connectedness; during this stage, the subject cannot perceive herself as being separate from her mother. The acquisition of language and the recognition of the self as a separate, finite being complete the transition from the semiotic to the symbolic phase of development. Since Sophie’s only prior experience of Martine was in the womb, she never experiences a proper thetic break from the mother. The effects of this rupture are evident in the difficulties that Sophie encounters when attempting to communicate verbally with her mother. When Martine picks Sophie up at the airport, she begs her silent daughter to talk to her: “‘Say something,’ she urged. ‘Say something. Just speak to me. Let me hear your voice’” (41).
However, hours later Sophie remains mute: “I still had not said anything to her” (42). Years later, at the age of eighteen, Sophie still has trouble speaking to her mother: “I leaned over and kissed her cheek to show her that I appreciated her trying to be a good mother. I wanted to tell her that I loved her, but the words would not roll off my tongue” (79). Martine also finds communicating with Sophie to be difficult; near the end of the novel when the two reconnect after a period of estrangement, Sophie asks her mother why she did not respond to the pictures she had sent her of her new granddaughter, and Martine replies, “I couldn’t find the words” (161).

Indeed, oftentimes language seems to serve as a barrier between the two women rather than a bridge. However, Martine intimates that she and Sophie experienced a level of communication when Sophie was in the womb. After confessing that she had tried to “destroy” Sophie before she was born with various poisons and by “beating [her] stomach with wooden spoons,” Martine says, “When I was carrying you, you were brave…You wanted to live…You were going to kill me before I killed you” (190). This prenatal dynamic between mother and daughter portrays their earliest exchanges (which were purely corporeal and non-verbal) as roiling and volatile, which aligns with Kristeva’s descriptions of the chora as “rupture and articulations” and “infinite ‘conjunctions’ and ‘disjunctions.’” Martine and Sophie’s relationship reflects its tumultuous beginnings; since both women were denied the opportunity to progress through the typical stages of mother-child separation and psychosocial development (and since Martine was essentially a child herself when she was raped and impregnated by a soldier), it is perhaps unsurprising that they have a troubled relationship with the symbolic, or the realm of language, especially in regards to each other. Also, Sophie’s
childhood nightmares of Martine trying “to squeeze her into the small frame” so that they could be in the same picture, and “open[ing] her arms like two long hooks” and wrestling her to the floor seem to suggest that she sensed her mother’s possessiveness and narcissistic overidentification before meeting her in New York, which supports the idea that the two achieved some form of communication when they shared the same body.

The root cause of the two traumas that Martine passes down to her daughter (i.e., the specter of the rape and the abuse of the testing) is the misogynistic society of Haiti. In the novel, Danticat focuses on the period during which the Duvalier regime terrorized the country, but, as Donette A. Francis points out, poor Haitian women were also “systematically raped and sexually harassed” by the US Marines that occupied the country from 1915 to 1934. Much of the history of twentieth-century Haiti involves the oppression and disenfranchisement of women, through strategies such as the denial of basic rights (like the right to vote) and the use of state-sponsored rape to punish dissidents and spread fear through the countryside. Paradoxically, while Haitian women were frequent targets of sexual violence inflicted by Haitian men, those same women were expected to remain “pure” and virginal for marriage to a Haitian man. Counihan observes that “the logic of testing provides a fiction in which women exert a degree of sexual agency.” In other words, testing upholds the myth of female promiscuity and erases the realities of male violence. Moreover, the “mothers of the nation” are conscripted into this process of erasure and surveillance by virtue of the fact that both their daughters’ social status and their own are determined by their ability to police their daughters’ virginity. As Grandmè Ifé explains to Sophie, “If a child dies, you do not die. But if your child is disgraced, you are disgraced….If I give a soiled daughter to her
husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me” (156). Thus, the patriarchy infiltrates the mother-daughter relationship, enlisting mothers as “enforcers” who “emulate the Tonton Macoute” by surveilling and violating their daughters’ bodies. This indoctrination is so strong that it follows Sophie to America, where Martine, who was severely traumatized by her own testing experience, decides to test her daughter. When Sophie confronts her mother about the testing once she is an adult, Martine cannot give her a good reason: “I did it,” she said, “because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater excuse” (170). The same oppressive values and historical trauma that damaged Martine in her youth migrate with her to the US, which, as Counihan points out, “complicates the narrative of the American immigrant’s perfect rebirth.”

Like the Caco women who came before her, Sophie sustains both psychological and physical wounds as a result of institutionalized misogyny. To end the testing abuse, Sophie takes matters into her own hands. One night she searches the kitchen for her mother’s mortar and pestle; she brings the pestle to her bedroom and uses it to break her hymen: “My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet” (88). When she fails the test that night, her mother throws her out and tells her to go to Joseph: “You just go to him and see what he can do for you” (88). After this act of self-mutilation, Sophie spends two days in the hospital and four weeks “with stitches between [her] legs,” and thereafter sex with Joseph is painful (130). She marries Joseph and gives birth to their daughter Brigitte via Caesarian section (since a vaginal birth “would have totally destroyed [her]”), and does not have contact with her mother for two years (196). When Brigitte is still an infant, emotional and sexual
intimacy problems with Joseph compel Sophie to return to Haiti to visit Tante Atie and Grandmè Ifé. The trip becomes an opportunity for her to reexamine some of the familial and cultural wounding that has ravaged her body and psyche. The effects of her mother’s emotional and physical abuse have manifested as body dysmorphia, bulimia, anxiety, and self-loathing. She tells her grandmother, “‘I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband. Sometimes I feel like I should be off somewhere by myself. That is why I am here’” (123). However, the visit to Haiti only reopens old wounds, especially once Martine arrives (at Grandmè Ifé’s request, because she believes that conflict between a mother and daughter “puts a curse on the family”) (162). When Sophie attempts to explain her bulimia to her mother, Martine dismisses it: “‘Why would you do that? I have never heard of a Haitian woman getting anything like that’” (179). In the eyes of the other Caco women, Sophie’s bulimia threatens her cultural identity, because Haiti is a country where food is a “luxury” that one cannot “waste” (179).

Once Brigitte is born, Sophie commits to a path of self-healing as a method of breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma and abuse in her matrilineage. She joins a sexual phobia group and begins seeing a therapist. For Sophie, the most daunting and immediate challenge is to overcome her fear of her abject feminine body. Childbirth increases her bodily self-loathing; she admits that “Even though so much time has passed since I’d given birth, I still felt extremely fat,” and that she feels “both fat and guilty” after eating meals (112, 122). The changes to her body caused by pregnancy and childbirth mortify her: “I almost refused to let Joseph take pictures of me with [Brigitte]. I was too ashamed of the stitches on my stomach and the flabs of fat all over my body” (129). It is notable that Sophie’s experience of cultural and familial intergenerational
trauma manifests as bulimia and a fear of fat, because these issues set her apart from her ancestors in a very Americanized way. As Sabrina Strings and Amy Erdman Farrell have observed, the fat black body has long been a signifier of inferiority and primitivism in the United States. As a Haitian immigrant in the US, Sophie already has to work to defy stereotypes and misconceptions about her country (for instance, the American kids at school “accused Haitians of having HBO—Haitian Body Odor,” and believe that all Haitians have AIDS), and a fat body would only further stigmatize her (51). Interestingly, when she returns to Haiti as an adult, she seems hyperaware of Tante Atie’s fat body, noting “her pudgy face” and “wide buttocks” (100). In addition to inheriting the trauma associated with the misogynist traditions of her home country, Sophie has internalized the (also misogynist) fat prejudice of her adopted country. This cross-cultural trauma also intrudes on her romantic relationship. Sophie dreads sexual intimacy with Joseph, both because of the emotional and physical consequences of the testing abuse, and because of her disgust with her “fat,” abject body (even though she is “so tiny, so very petite”) (179). After returning from Haiti, she “doubles,” or disassociates, during sex with Joseph—a coping mechanism that she first developed during her mother’s testing—and then binges and purges after he falls asleep (200). In her sexual phobia group, Sophie works with an incest survivor and a victim of female genital cutting as she tries to learn how to embrace her body and move on from her abuse; the three women regularly burn pieces of paper containing their abusers’ names and repeat chants like, “We are beautiful women with strong bodies” (202). Despite the steps that Sophie takes to heal, by the end of the novel it is still unclear whether she will ever be able to accept her body and her sexuality.
Xuela, on the other hand, celebrates and asserts the abjection of her body in defiance of the cultural imperative to loathe and submit herself. Whereas Breath, Eyes, Memory depicts the struggles of subaltern women enduring the effects of a violent postcolonial regime, Kincaid’s The Autobiography of My Mother imagines a world where one such woman defies her would-be oppressors by taking ownership of her sexuality and refusing motherhood. The novel follows the life of Xuela Claudette Richardson, the daughter of a Carib mother and a half African, half Scot father. The remnants of Dominica’s colonial past pervade every aspect of her life, a painful reality that is epitomized in the first words she ever learns to read: “THE BRITISH EMPIRE.” The novel opens with what will become a familiar refrain: “My mother died at the moment I was born” (3). The repetition of this information throughout the text feels compulsive—as if Xuela keeps repeating the fact of the originary trauma of her life in an unsatisfying attempt to experience a moment that would be impossible to experience, since, as Elissa Marder observes, “We remain both bound to and exiled from our own birth.” After Xuela is born and her mother dies, her father Alfred, a taciturn policeman who later becomes a rich and corrupt government official, places her “in the care of the same woman he paid to wash his clothes,” and only visits her every fortnight when he comes to pick up his clean clothes (4). While this arrangement appears to indicate that her father is neglectful and indifferent, he also insists that Xuela be sent to school—an “unusual request…[because] girls did not attend school” (12). She continues to attend school until she is fifteen years old, during which time she learns “the history of an array of people [she] would never meet…Romans, Gauls, Saxons, Britons, the British people,” and she recognizes that this colonialized education has a “malicious intent”: “to make me feel
humiliated, humbled, small” (59). Indeed, most of the people and situations she encounters in the novel endeavor to belittle and subjugate her due to both her gender and her ethnicity.

As the daughter of a Carib mother and a half-African father, Xuela is doubly conquered—the Other of the Other. Xuela tells the reader that the Caribs, the precolonial indigenous inhabitants of the island, are now “extinct, a few hundred of them still living,” mostly on a reservation (197). She then clarifies that seemingly contradictory statement: “They were like living fossils, they belonged in a museum” (197). Her African classmates perceive her as an oddity; she notes that “these boys looked at me and looked at me,” focusing on her Carib features and ignoring her African ones (15). The French, who colonized Dominica before the British, were the first to bring enslaved Africans to the island; Britain took control of the island in the late eighteenth century and abolished slavery in its colonies in the nineteenth century, yet those of African descent continued to be oppressed and disenfranchised, even though they constituted the majority of the population. As her all-male classmates glare at her ethnic facial features, Xuela reflects on the fact that the Africans consider it a point of pride that the Caribs “had been defeated and then exterminated,” while “the African people had been defeated but had survived” (16). Xuela’s ethnic identity is further complicated by the fact that her paternal grandfather was a red-headed rum trader from Scotland who married the daughter of slaves. At every turn, Xuela is ostracized and precluded from a sense of belonging. However, instead of internalizing and succumbing to this oppression, she develops into a fierce, sensual, autonomous force. As Kathryn E. Morris writes, Xuela is “a subject who defies the colonizer’s gaze and who does not permit any surrender of her self to that
gaze.” Through Xuela, Kincaid pivots the center, so that it becomes a subaltern who speaks; even though as a woman and a subaltern she is “doubly effaced,” Xuela submits her oppressors to the same “gaze” with which they attempt to circumscribe her.

The source of Xuela’s defiant power and singular vision seems to originate from her lack of fear and the strength she draws from resurrecting her mother through imagination and narrative. She tells the reader that when she was young, “I was not afraid, because my mother had already died and that is the only thing a child is really afraid of” (14). Her mother, also named Xuela, was also motherless; the younger Xuela repeats the story of elder Xuela being left outside a convent’s gates “wrapped in pieces of clean old cloth” containing her first name (79). Xuela mourns the fact that the “attachment, spiritual and physical, that a mother is said to have for her child, that confusion of who is who, flesh and flesh, that inseparableness which is said to exist between mother and child—all this was absent between my mother and her own mother…[it was] also absent between my mother and myself” (199). This longing for a connection with the mother she never knew compels Xuela to effectively give birth to her mother by channeling her spirit, recreating her story, and intertwining her story with her own. She exemplifies Audre Lorde’s idea that black women “can learn to mother” themselves, which means that they “must establish authority over [their] own definition.”

Moreover, as Kim Chernin writes in The Woman Who Gave Birth to Her Mother, a daughter can “re-create[] her real mother or…a symbolic mother to hold and foster her psychological and emotional development,” and that “[t]here are times when a woman must give birth to her own mother by becoming a mother to herself.” Xuela accomplishes both of these things as she “authors—and authorizes—her mother’s story,
which becomes part of [her] self-narration.”21 The paradoxical title—The Autobiography of My Mother—encapsulates the blurred boundaries between mothers and daughters in subject formation. In a sense, the novel is a realization of Martine’s Marassas myth, as “[Xuela’s] subjectivity is marked as both supplement and substitute to her mother’s.”22 Unlike the Caco women in Breath, Eyes, Memory for whom the body becomes the central site of trauma and estrangement, Xuela’s matrilineage is one of extra-bodily mothering. Without the “flesh” and inseparableness of the pre-Oedipal stage, the daughters in Xuela’s family line must “re-create” the one who came before them, thus giving body to their mother by housing her in their own.

Notably, Xuela seems to retain corporeal knowledge of her mother, even though the two never met outside of the mother’s body. The “resurrection” of the mother occurs most frequently in Xuela’s dreams, where she can only ever see one part of her mother’s body: “I never saw her face, and even when she appeared to me in a dream I never saw it, I saw only the back of her feet, her heels, as she came down a ladder” (198). Xuela’s dream visions of her mother always focus on the same spot: “Night after night I saw her heels, only her heels coming down to meet me” (19). Interestingly, in various Eastern religions, the lower body represents the root chakra, which connects us to family and tribe: “[The root chakra] is our connection to traditional familial beliefs that support the formation of identity and a sense of belonging to a group of people in a geographic location.”23 Xuela’s unconscious obsession with her dead mother’s feet bespeaks her desire for a sense of tribal and familial belonging. However, without a mother, Xuela feels that such belonging is impossible: “since the one person I would have consented to own me had never lived to do so, I did not want to belong to anyone; I did not want
anyone to belong to me” (104). Regarding this sense of cultural isolation, Daniel Arbino observes, “the absence of [Xuela’s] mother…becomes conflated with her lack of motherland.” Also, the synecdochal conception of the faceless mother as “heels coming down” a ladder emphasizes the fact that Xuela only ever knew her mother when she was a fetus, never as a fully formed being separate from herself. In one of her dreams, her mother “sang a song, but it had no words; it was not a lullaby, it was not sentimental, not meant to calm me when my soul roiled at the harshness of life” (31). This song nestled deep in Xuela’s unconscious that “was not a lullaby” and had “no words” signifies the semiotic chora; similar to the exchanges that transpired between Martine and Sophie when they shared a body, the prenatal connection between Xuela and her mother was not simply encouraging and loving. Also denied a proper thetic break from her mother, Xuela, like Sophie, experiences difficulty communicating with others later in life (“my voice felt as if it were trapped in my hand”) and expresses a desire to never have to communicate verbally: “and I found this, the difficulty of speaking, the possibility that it might be a struggle for me to ever speak again, delicious” (151, 51). In fact, she does not even speak until she is four years old (6). Although she avoids talking with others, she speaks to herself in an act of self-mothering: “I spoke to myself because I grew to like the sound of my own voice. It had a sweetness to me, it made my loneliness less” (16). Even though her precarious position as a motherless, female ethnic minority in a misogynist, racist society means that there is “no one between [her] and the black room of the world,” Xuela finds ways to access and utilize the bodily memory of her mother buried in her unconscious to both care for herself and resist conforming to societal norms (3).
Xuela learns proper social codes through her years of formal education and her relationships with various other-mother figures, yet she chooses to reject such lessons. In school she learns the “wearying demand” of modesty, which “was only one of many demands made on [her] simply because [she] was female” (42). When she is older and attends a school with other girls, “their bodies, already a source of anxiety and shame, were draped in blue sacks made from course cotton” (80). The social conditioning of her school years aligns with the demands placed on her mother by the French nuns who raised her, “that she be a quiet, shy, long-suffering, unquestioning, modest, wishing-to-die-soon person” (199). When her father remarries and brings Xuela to live with him and his new wife (who has “the face of evil” and attempts to kill Xuela with a poisoned necklace), her stepmother endeavors to teach her that her body and its natural smell are abhorrent: “My human form and odor were an opportunity to heap scorn on me” (28, 32).

When Xuela is fifteen, Alfred sends her to Roseau, the capital of Dominica, for further schooling and places her in the house of his acquaintance Monsieur LaBatte. His wife, Madame LaBatte, invites Xuela “to regard her as if she were [her] own mother,” and proceeds to attempt to properly feminize and train her “to make a gift of [her] to her husband”; since Madame LaBatte’s own “womb was like a sieve,” she tries to groom her new ward for her husband’s sexual pleasure and to give her a child (66, 68, 76). Xuela ignores the gender conditioning she encounters from schoolteachers, surrogate mothers, and peers regarding the need for modesty, subservience, and self-loathing, and instead comes “to love [herself] in defiance” (56). Additionally, she takes note of the ways in which the social norms of her community have been dictated by their colonizers. When Alfred and his new wife drive their new “motorcar” to a Christian church and then eat a
Sunday meal “made up of meat cooked in the English style,” Xuela observes that “it also signified defeat yet again, for what would the outcome have been of all the lives of the conquered if they had not come to believe in the gods of the people who had conquered them?” (119, 133). Much of *The Autobiography of My Mother* traces Xuela’s process of developing a sense of self in the face of such imperialist ideology without her mother to guide her. As Alexandra W. Schultheis writes, “Xuela is socially denigrated and mentally strong, but not necessarily good; her story is not one of triumph over adversity or of unremitting oppression, but of building subjectivity out of lack and historical trauma.”

In Xuela, Kincaid creates a fierce visionary who objectifies and conquers her would-be conquerors, in part by drawing power from the abjection of her body.

Without a mother to control “the boundaries between body and not-body,” Xuela forges a selfhood rooted in corporeality. She exhibits what Elizabeth Grosz has termed “embodied subjectivity,” or a non-dualistic conception of the self that admits both the mind and the body into the process of identity formation. When her new stepmother tries to teach her that her body is shameful and disgusting, she responds in a fashion by now characteristic of me: whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most. I loved the smell of the thin dirt behind my ears, the smell of my unwashed mouth, the smell that came from between my legs, the smell in the pit of my arm, the smell of my unwashed feet. Whatever about me caused offense, whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not a moral failing—those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted. (32)

For Xuela, bodily abjection becomes not only acceptable but desirable and holy. In yet another act of self-mothering, she decides to embrace the parts of herself that she is
instructed to despise. Consequently, she comes to define herself through not only her thoughts and feelings, but also through her smells, sensations, sexual desires, and bodily waste. When she gets her first period, she is “not surprised and not afraid,” even though she “had never heard of it,” and believes that “it was just its real self, my menstrual flow,” and that its appearance “had the force of destiny fulfilled” (57). As she goes through puberty, she enjoys how the odor of her underarms and vagina becomes “pungent, sharp,” and for the rest of her life, her “hands almost never left those places” (58). When Monsieur LaBatte catches her sitting under a tree and playing with herself, she does not cover herself in shame and run away, but rather meets his gaze and continues the act: “This scene of me placing my hand between my legs and then enjoying the smell of myself and Monsieur LaBatte watching me lasted until the usual sudden falling of the dark” (70). She proceeds to have sex for the first time, and when “he was through with [her] and [she] with him,” she relishes the physical ecstasy of the experience, free of emotional attachment or guilt: “He was not a man of love, I did not need him to be” (71). Indeed, in all of her sexual encounters with men, Xuela asserts and fulfills her desires, at times practically “conquering” the men who would seek to conquer her. Xuela’s relationship to her sexuality exemplifies Audre Lorde’s argument that the erotic is a kind of power, “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane.” Regarding the inherent human “impulse to possess,” she tells the reader, “some people choose husbands; I chose to possess myself. I resembled a tree, a tall tree with long, strong branches” (174). Xuela’s embodied subjectivity gives her a sense of autonomy, rootedness, empowerment, and self-ownership.
However, Xuela also remains perpetually isolated and alone (even when she is in a relationship with someone else), and the cause of this loneliness and emotional alienation may be connected to the same source as her power: her inability to release her mother. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva argues that we must “split” with the mother in order to fully individuate and enter into society and healthy (hetero)sexual relationships. To separate from the maternal “Thing” (which she defines as “the real that does not lend itself to signification,” and which can also be imagined as the maternal body), we must commit a symbolic “matricide,” which Kristeva calls “the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation.”\(^{29}\) This process is much more difficult for daughters than for sons, because within a heterosexual psychoanalytic development narrative, the daughter must transpose her erotic desire for the mother to the other gender, whereas the son must only transfer that longing to another woman. For a daughter, this process also fractures her identity: “Whereas the son splits the mother in order to unify himself, if the daughter splits the mother, she splits herself.”\(^{30}\) However, according to Kristeva, if a daughter never breaks with her mother (in other words, if she never devotes herself to the symbolic order and develops defenses against her mother), she risks carrying her mother around inside her like a “living corpse” that “no longer nourishes.”\(^{31}\) Oliver writes, “For women, matricide is a form of suicide. A woman cannot properly mourn the lost object. She cannot get rid of the maternal body. Kristeva woefully claims that she carries the maternal Thing with her locked like a corpse in the crypt of her psyche.”\(^{32}\) For Xuela, whose mother literally becomes a corpse the moment she is born, splitting from the maternal Thing becomes an impossible task, because she is never able to properly mourn the profound loss. Therefore, she locks her mother up within herself. As Nicholas Abraham and Maria
Torok write, “Inexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objectal correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography.”

By introjecting her dead mother into her psyche, Xuela “interrupts desiring metonymy,” thereby retaining her erotic desire and longing for the maternal object. As aforementioned, Xuela imaginatively recreates her mother coterminously with the development of her own subjectivity; as a result, she resurrects her mother inside herself as a living corpse: “In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from” (227). This internal resurrection confuses Xuela’s desiring economy. As Marder observes, “Swallowing the dead other in order to keep that dead other alive within can also be read as a kind of primitive inverted confusion between giving birth, burying, and being buried.” In other words, Xuela not only gives birth to her mother, she also buries her mother within herself, wherein she is buried with her dead mother. Significantly, her recognition of her motherless state as a young child coincides with the discovery of her hand:

Who was I? My mother died at the moment I was born. You are not anything at the moment you are born. This fact of my mother dying at the moment I was born became a central motif of my life. I cannot remember when I first knew this fact of my life; I cannot remember when I did not know this fact of my life; perhaps it was at the moment I could recognize my own hand. (225)

Xuela’s hand becomes the way she both comforts and pleasures herself. After she comes to live with her father and stepmother, she masturbates in her bed to calm herself when
the sounds of predatory wildlife in the night frighten her: “And it [i.e., her fear] ended only after my hands had traveled up and down all over my own body in a loving caress, finally coming to the soft, moist spot between my legs, and a gasp of pleasure had escaped my lips which I would allow no one to hear” (43). Xuela conquers her body before anyone else can, in an act of both self-mothering and autoeroticism. Notably, it is her hand—not the phallus—that seems to serve as the object of her sexual desire. The first time she has sex with Philip, her future husband (who she does not love), he enters her room to discover her playing with herself. When he says her name, she “want[s] to respond in a normal way,” but cannot because her “voice felt as if it were trapped in [her] hand, the hand that was trapped in the hair between [her] legs” (151). Here, her difficulty speaking after she has sexually aroused herself with her hand serves as another sign that she has failed to separate from the maternal Thing. Oliver writes, “The child must agree to lose the mother in order to be able to imagine her or name her.” In other words, losing (or “killing”) the mother is necessary to enter into the realm of language, which is the only place where the subject can recognize and articulate the mother as separate from herself. As the opposite of (and complement to) the feet that continually appear in Xuela dreams, her hands become a symbol of (and connection to) her dead mother. Therefore, by fetishizing her hands, Xuela’s autoeroticism becomes homoeroticism—an erotic exchange with the lost mother. Morris supports this hypothesis of a queer dynamic in Xuela’s relationship with her dead mother when she observes that “Kincaid romanticizes the mother in a sexualized reverie,” and that the “mother/daughter relationship in Kincaid’s work may be considered a symbolically sexually transgressive relationship in the fashion of a S/M relationship….the moment of birth, from the daughter’s perspective,
might be considered a moment of sexual connection with and disconnection from the
mother’s body.” Xuela imagines her hand performing the nurturing acts that her mother
would have performed if she had lived, and because she never commits the necessary
“matricide” that would have separated her from her mother, Xuela never fully transposes
her erotic desire for the mother to another person, and therefore her hand also becomes
the locus of her queer desire for the dead mother. Consequently, Xuela lives an
emotionally stunted and isolated life—motherless, childless, and loveless—forever trying
to achieve “that inseparableness which is said to exist between mother and child” (199).

In Breath, Eyes, Memory, Sophie also carries her mother around like a “living
corpse,” for Martine’s brutal rape causes a spiritual death from which she never recovers.
When Sophie first meets her mother at the airport in New York, she is shocked by her
ghostly appearance: “She did not look like the picture Tante Atie had on her night table.
Her face was long and hollow. Her hair had a blunt cut and she had long spindly legs. She
had dark circles under her eyes and, as she smiled, lines of wrinkles tightened her
expression” (42). After their first night together, during which Sophie wakes Martine
from a violent nightmare and then watches over her the rest of the night, she walks into
the bathroom and encounters a new self in the mirror: “I looked at my red eyes in the
mirror while splashing cold water over my face. New eyes seemed to be looking back at
me. A new face altogether. Someone who had aged in one day, as though she had been
through a time machine, rather than an airplane. Welcome to New York, this face seemed
to be saying. Accept your new life” (49). After fewer than twenty-four hours with her
mother, Sophie already senses that Martine is her responsibility—a burden that she must
carry. As aforementioned, it is not until the age of twelve that Sophie learns that she is
the product of her mother’s rape; after Martine tells her about a man grabbing her “from the side of the road” and “pull[ing] [her] into a cane field,” Sophie recognizes that it is too late to save her mother from the effects of this originary trauma: “It took me twelve years to piece together my mother’s entire story. By then, it was already too late” (61). Gabriele Schwab argues that “individual violent acts such as torture and rape…are liminal experiences that bring us to the abyss of human abjection. These violent acts cause soul murder and social death.”

Ann J. Cahill echoes this sentiment when she argues that rape results in “the violent destabilizing of the existing self,” and that the victim can experience “a kind of walking social death.” Martine’s rape in a cane field at the age of sixteen causes a “soul murder and social death,” and because she never receives any form of mental health counseling or psychological support, she never heals from the event. Sweeney writes, “Her flesh deadened by violation and her voice silenced, Martine attempts to blot out the body, the unwitnessed site of un-voicing, and is henceforth condemned to live as a zombie from Haitian folklore whose spirit only half-inhabits the body.” Like Xuela, Sophie never truly gets to meet her mother because, in a sense, Martine is dead by the time she is born.

Therefore, Sophie is not able to perform the “matricide” necessary for her individuation, in part because her mother is already a “living corpse” when they meet; consequently, she is easily pulled into Martine’s Marassas myth. As aforementioned, Sophie learns to “double” or disassociate during her mother’s testing as a defense mechanism, and she later applies this same coping technique during sex with Joseph. After she returns from her trip to Haiti, Joseph initiates sex while she doubles:
I closed my eyes and thought of the Marassa, the doubling. I was lying there on that bed and my clothes were being peeled off of my body, but really I was somewhere else. Finally, as an adult, I had a chance to console my mother again. I was lying in bed with my mother. I was holding her and fighting off that man…Even though she had forced it on me, of her sudden will, we were now even more than friends. We were twins, in spirit. Marassas. (200)

Similar to the simulated rape of the testing, Martine has “forced” the symbiotic, psychically invasive connection of the Marassas on her daughter. Like Xuela, Sophie has introjected the maternal Thing, thereby “interrupt[ing] desiring metonymy”; because she has not been able to split with the mother, she has failed to transpose her erotic desire to another person, therefore it is her mother she envisions during sexual intimacy. Counihan echoes this idea, noting, “In response to her husband’s advances, she both interrupts and redirects the circulation of heterosexual desire into the closed loop of incestuous homoerotic longing.”41 Although Sophie makes steps to heal and develop a healthier relationship with her mother, she remains ambivalent and conflicted. When her therapist tries to get her to admit that there have been times when she has hated her mother, Sophie will not comply: “‘You don’t want to say it. Why not?’ she asked. ‘Because it wouldn’t be right, and maybe because it wouldn’t be true’” (207). When reading letters to their mothers aloud in her sexual phobia group, she says, “It would be easy to hate you, but I can’t because you are part of me. You are me” (203). Sophie is unable to hate her mother, yet she is riddled with self-hatred. Kristeva claims that this dynamic is a result of the failure to commit matricide: “Indeed, how can She be that bloodthirsty Fury, since I am She (sexually and narcissistically), She is I? Consequently, the hatred I bear her is not
oriented toward the outside but is locked up within myself.” Sophie subsumes Martine’s trauma, nightmares, and self-loathing, and in so doing she “reconstitutes” her mother within herself, effectively “bur[ying] [her] alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person,” because from their first day together in New York—when she meets her “zombie” or “living corpse” of a mother—she believes that Martine is her burden to bear.

This responsibility becomes untenable when Martine’s mental health deteriorates rapidly after she reveals to Sophie that she is pregnant. At this point, the focus of the novel shifts to Martine, which subtly conveys the successful blurring of the two women’s stories and subjectivities. Marc, Martine’s Haitian boyfriend, wants the baby and offers to marry her, but she resists: “Of course he wants to marry me, but look at me. I am a fat woman trying to pass for thin. A dark woman trying to pass for light. And I have no breasts. I don’t know when this cancer will come back. I am not an ideal mother” (189). Interestingly, all of the reasons Martine cites for why she would not be the “ideal mother” and wife are physical characteristics. However, when Sophie presses her, Martine confesses that her nightmares have gotten worse since she became pregnant. She believes that having this baby will push her over the edge into madness: “I will have it at the expense of my sanity. They will take it out of me one day and put me away the next” (192). She says that she wants to get an abortion, but claims that the fetus will not allow it: “It bites at the inside of my stomach like a leech. Last night after I talked to Marc about letting it go, I felt the skin getting tight on my belly and for a whole minute I couldn’t breathe. I had to lie down and say I had changed my mind before I could breathe normally” (191). Like Sophie (who Martine claims was “going to kill me before I killed [her]” during her first pregnancy), this baby serves as a reminder of the trauma of her
rape, and appears to assert its own agency in the womb. Martine attempts to get an abortion, but the clinic sends her away due to a mandatory twenty-four-hour waiting period; in that time, she begins “seeing him. Over and over. That man who raped me” (199). Shortly thereafter, Martine starts hearing voices and believes that the baby is talking to her: “Everywhere I go, I hear it. I hear him saying things to me. You tintin, malpròp. He calls me a filthy whore. I never want to see this child’s face” (217). Finally, she takes matters into her own hands by stabbing herself in the stomach seventeen times “with an old rusty knife,” and then dies on the way to the hospital (224). Regarding this self-induced abortion and suicide, Francis contends, “For Martine, her body is the only site over which she can exercise power,” and Alexander argues that “Martine’s choice to save herself begins the repositioning of the emphasis from child to mother.” Indeed, her last words in the ambulance, “Mwin pa kapab enkò,” which Marc translates as, “She could not carry the baby,” get to the very heart of Martine’s decision: she cannot “carry” the baby (as Sophie “carries” her mother’s living corpse), because to do so again would threaten her already precarious subjectivity. Unfortunately, both her lived realities as a subaltern woman as well as much of feminist psychoanalytic thought affirm this threat.

Kristeva, along with other object-relations theorists like Melanie Klein and Nancy Chodorow, have been criticized for the centrality of the figure of the “child” and the erasure or dismissal of the mother in their feminist revisions of Freud and Lacan. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges have observed that in Kristeva’s case studies, “the mother is defined as the problem for her female patients,” and that her work is “detached from cultural determinants”—in other words, Kristeva fails to consider how factors like race, ethnicity, and socio-economic class affect the experiences of women and mothers.
Indeed, Patricia Hill Collins argues that white feminist theorists like Kristeva, Chodorow, and Irigaray “are themselves participants in a system of privilege that rewards them for not seeing race and class privilege as being important.”46 Marianne Hirsch argues that while feminists have admitted the female child into psychoanalysis, the adult woman who is a mother still “continues to exist only in relation to her child, never as a subject in her own right.”47 Amber Jacobs echoes this sentiment: “psychoanalysis remains complicit with the reproduction of a model that relegates the mother to the realm of the imaginary.”48 Finally, Juliet Mitchell writes, “We have a great deal of rich work on mothering, but no place for the mother within the laws of the human order.”49 Kristeva’s theories regarding the necessity of separating from the abject maternal body and committing “matricide” in order to individuate seem to reflect larger societal issues regarding the debased position of mothers in patriarchal culture. Andrea O’Reilly confirms this idea when she notes, “Patriarchal motherhood causes motherwork to be oppressive to women because it necessitates the repression or denial of the mother’s own selfhood.”50 Additionally, Collins points out that as women of color, mothers like Martine experience further challenges to both their self-definition and their basic survival, because “[r]acial domination and economic exploitation profoundly shape the mothering context.”51

While debating the validity of such critiques of Kristeva and other object-relations theorists is outside the scope of this chapter, they do seem to identify a possible reason for the existence of an adversarial dynamic at the root of mother/daughter relationships, a reason which proves Martine was right to worry that Sophie was going to kill her. That is, if, indeed, there is no place for mother-as-subject in the mother-child relationship, and if
a woman risks “the obliteration of the self” in motherhood, then perhaps it should be unsurprising that pregnancy and motherhood can activate a woman’s instinct for self-preservation and self-defense. Therefore, it seems only logical that, in certain cases, infanticide can become “the sine-qua-non condition” of individuation as a safeguard against matricide, especially when the would-be mother’s subjectivity is already threatened by other forces, which is certainly the case for subaltern women like Martine and Xuela. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization.” In other words, as subaltern women from postcolonial regimes, the women in Danticat’s and Kincaid’s novels risk erasure and extermination from both within and without—that is, from both the process of separating from their children, as well as from the oppressive, racist societies in which they live.

Both Martine and Xuela perform self-abortions as acts of self-preservation and defiance against the patriarchal cultures that would seek to subjugate them as “mothers of the nation.” As previously noted, Martine believes that having a second child will either drive her mad or kill her: “Marc, he saves my life every night [by waking her up from the nightmares], but I am afraid he gave me this baby that’s going to take that life away” (190). Schwab contends that “[t]orture and rape, the two most prominent forms of soul murder, eradicate psychic time because time cannot heal the victim’s suffering in the same way time heals other wounds.” In other words, Martine, who still gets “raped every night” in her dreams, does not simply need “time” to get over the trauma of her
rape, because her trauma exists outside of linear time. Also, since rape can destroy “the intersubjective, embodied agency and therefore personhood of a woman,” Martine’s sense of self was already “obliterated” when she gave birth to her first child, so a second child would only further destabilize her subjectivity. When considering both the psychological effects of the rape and the objectification and rejection of the mother that occurs as a “necessary” part of a child’s psychosocial development, Martine’s decision to leave young Sophie in her sister’s care and her later desire for oneness with Sophie as “Marassas,” or twin lovers, may be viewed more sympathetically. Like Xuela, Sophie’s subjectivity becomes “both supplement and substitute to her mother’s,” since Martine is psychically spent by the time they form a relationship. As such, she has nothing left to offer a second child. Unlike her first pregnancy with Sophie, who Martine believed was going to “going to kill me before I killed [her],” she kills both the baby and herself concurrently to ward off the inevitable matricide that she fears. Francis sees this act as “an instance of ‘embodied protest’ wherein resistance pathologically manifests itself on the body,” and Alexander contends that the self-induced abortion shows that Martine “refuses to reproduce the nation and its nationalist designation of her as an invisible, second-class citizen.” Indeed, Martine fails to perform motherhood in the ways that her home country of Haiti or her adopted country of the US demand. Even dying before Sophie subverts the “natural” order, because, as Grandmè Ifé tells her granddaughter at Martine’s funeral, the Caco women come from a place “where the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her” (234). This sentiment appears to confirm Kristeva’s assertion that “matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation,” since Grandmè Ifé, Martine’s mother, still lives, and
Martine herself arguably never becomes “fully a women” after her traumatic rape at a young age. However, Martine’s final act of killing her baby before it could kill her would seem to flip this figuration on its head. Rather than sacrifice herself mentally and/or physically for her child (as a good “mother of the nation” would do), Martine finally locates and asserts her own subjectivity in her final, deliberate act of infanticide. In a sense, she becomes a mother to herself by refusing motherhood.

Xuela also refuses motherhood, because she fears that it would disrupt the selfhood that she has built around her mother’s “living corpse,” and because having children would ensconce her even deeper in a nation-state that represents everything she loathes. At her first sight of menstrual blood, Xuela senses what it signifies and worries what its “failure to appear regularly after a certain interval” would mean: “Perhaps I knew then that the child in me would never be stilled enough to allow me to have a child of my own” (57). As an adolescent, Xuela already recognizes that having a child would require her to dismantle the imagined mother/daughter relationship that she has developed in her psyche. A few years later when Madame LaBatte tells her that the reason she is sick is because she is pregnant with Monsieur LaBatte’s child, Xuela is furious: “I…instantly felt that if there was a child in me I could expel it through the sheer force of my will” (81). When her attempts to “will” it out of her fail, she visits a local woman known as “Sange-Sange,” who she pays for a “thick black syrup to drink” that induces a miscarriage (82). For eight days, Xuela lies in a “small hole in a dirt floor” as her body, now a “volcano of pain,” expels the fetus; at the end of the ordeal, she experiences a sense of rebirth and has gained new wisdom (82). Thereafter, she uses her new knowledge to abort all of her pregnancies, thereby taking control of her reproductive
health. Xuela believes that motherhood would threaten her subjectivity: “My own face was a comfort to me, my own body was a comfort to me, and no matter how swept away I would become by anyone or anything, in the end I allowed nothing to replace my own being in my mind”—not even a child (100). Ironically, this “being in [her] mind” is already not entirely her “own,” since she developed her subjectivity as “supplement and substitute” to her mother’s. Because in childbirth “a mother identifies with her own mother,” and “[t]he other cannot be separated from the self,” giving birth would alter the dyadic configuration of Xuela’s selfhood. In other words, Xuela cannot carry her mother’s living corpse and a baby without destabilizing her entire identity.

Additionally, for Xuela reproduction signifies entrance into a society that seeks to oppress and erase ethnic minorities. When she looks back at her life at the age of seventy, Xuela recognizes that while her mind and heart have resisted motherhood, her body has longed for it: “For years and years, each month my body would swell up slightly, mimicking the state of maternity, longing to conceive, mourning my heart’s and mind’s decision never to bring forth a child. I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation” (226). Here, she seems to respond to her body’s grief at being denied the experience of motherhood with an explanation: having a child would have meant adhering to the nationalist imperative to reproduce the populace—to become a “mother of the nation”—which would have also imposed on her the sense of cultural “belonging” that she has so vehemently resisted. In the eyes of the misogynistic society in which she lives, having a child would have meant fulfilling her biological “purpose” as a woman, and that child would have been assigned a racial categorization that could later be used as justification for discrimination and oppression. Therefore, Xuela’s refusal to reproduce is
both an act of self-preservation and political resistance, as it allows her to maintain her position on the periphery of society as an ethnic hybrid who “did not want to belong to anyone” (104).

Furthermore, Xuela reimagines and redefines the “mother” archetype in a grotesque creation myth that subverts Kristeva’s theories of maternal abjection and necessary “matricide.” After her first abortion, Xuela leaves the LaBattes’ home to live by herself in a small hut. During this time, she takes stock of her life and considers her future as a motherless woman who has refused motherhood:

My life was beyond empty. I had never had a mother, I had just recently refused to become one, and I knew then that this refusal would be complete. I would never become a mother, but that would not be the same as never bearing children. I would bear children, but I would never be a mother to them. I would bear them in abundance; they would emerge from my head, from my armpits, from between my legs; I would bear children, they would hang from me like fruit from a vine, but I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god. (97)

She proceeds to detail the various ways that she would “destroy” her children, like “swallowing them whole,” covering their bodies with diseased sores, throwing them off of cliffs, and “condem[ing] them to live in an empty space frozen in the same posture in which they had been born” (97). In this passage, Xuela envisions herself as a perverse fertility goddess. As Morris notes, “Kincaid writes the myth of the native woman’s fertility and cruel maternal tendencies into a monumental hyperbole.” In drawing a distinction between “bearing children” and “becoming a mother,” Xuela separates the act of reproduction from the “institution of motherhood” and the romanticized myths of
motherhood that persist in patriarchal cultures. Her new conception of female reproduction repositions children as the possessions of the woman who birthed them rather than the nation in which they were born, which is an empowering counter narrative for subaltern women living in a postcolonial society, whose bodies are frequently seen as possessions of the state. Also, these diseased, broken, or frozen babies—rather than the maternal body—come to signify the abject; the child becomes “what disturbs identity, system, order” that the woman who birthed it must reject. Indeed, ultimately these babies become “the most sickening of wastes,” the most abject object of all: the corpse. Xuela says that she “would decorate them when they were only corpses and set each corpse in a polished wooden box, and place the polished wooden box in the earth and forget the part of the earth where I had buried the box. It is in this way that I did not become a mother; it is in this way that I bore my children” (98). Xuela’s fantasy reverses Kristeva’s theories of maternal abjection and matricide by figuring the child as that which must be killed as the “sine-qua-non condition” of individuation.

This reversal completely destabilizes the mother-child relationship, for Xuela’s conception of the child as abject corpse seems to beg the question: if the mother “carries” the child, why shouldn’t the child “carry” the mother? In other words, is there a way in which the ostensible impossibility of “mother-as-subject” can be tied to a daughter’s difficulty in separating from and rejecting the mother, in letting go of her “living corpse”? Xuela’s grotesque creation myth seems to illustrate the absurdity of the imperative for such rejection and separation. In both Breath, Eyes, Memory and The Autobiography of My Mother, the stories and identities of mothers and daughters become inextricably intertwined—so much so that attempting to separate them (especially in the
case of Xuela) would be to unravel the women’s very subjectivity. As Angeletta KM Gourdine notes, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* “Martine’s merging of mother and daughter reflects Danticat’s narrative doubling, as the narrative diverges from a traditional *Bildungsroman* that presents Sophie’s growth and it becomes Martine’s story.” In a sense, the novels become *bildungsromans* of both the mothers and the daughters, as we watch Martine grow alongside Sophie, and elder Xuela grow within younger Xuela. As Xuela confesses at the end of the novel, “This account of my life has been an account of my mother’s life as much as it has been an account of mine” (227). Therefore, perhaps “carrying” the mother within does not have to be as debilitating and pathological as Kristeva proposes. Amber Jacobs posits that the reason why feminist psychoanalysis has had so much trouble theorizing the mother/daughter relationship is because it has been “locked into the terms of the male imaginary,” and that the relationship must be analyzed “through the framework of a foreclosed or absent underlying maternal law.” Perhaps it will take someone like Xuela—a fierce subaltern visionary who loves “whatever [she is] told to hate”—to uncover and write this new maternal law, to envision new theories that admit both the mother and the daughter into the process of subject formation (32).


3 Some controversy followed the publication of the novel, because many criticized Danticat’s portrayal of testing as a Haitian tradition, since the practice is actually rarely practiced anymore (and usually only in very rural areas of Haiti). In the 1998 edition of the novel, Danticat added an afterward in which she addresses the character of Sophie directly, whose “body is now being asked to represent a larger space than [her] flesh,” because readers are making assumptions about Haiti based on the novel (236). Danticat writes, “Tired of protesting, I feel I must explain. Of course, not all Haitian mothers are like [Sophie’s] mother. Not all Haitian daughters are tested, as [Sophie] has been” (236).


5 Counihan, 48.


8 Ibid., 35, 63n13.


10 Counihan, 40.

11 Alexander defines the title “mothers of the nation” as “an assigned designation that surreptitiously further justifies controlling women’s sexuality” (373). Pnina Werbner and Nira Yuval-Davis write, “The denial of women’s role as equal citizens in the public sphere arises not only from their relegation to the familial sphere but also from their simultaneous elevation as reproducers of the nation,” and “The nationalist discourse of women as ‘mothers of the nation’ banishes them…to the private sphere of the family.” *Women, Citizenship, and Difference*, Ed. Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner (New York: Zed Books, 1999), 12, 14.

12 Alexander, 376.

13 Counihan, 41.


26 Oliver, 57.


30 Oliver, 61.

31 Ibid., 62.

32 Ibid., 63.


35 Marder, 30.
36 Oliver, 62.
37 Morris, 961, 963.
40 Sweeney, 61.
41 Counihan, 49.
43 Abraham and Torok, 130.
44 Francis, 86; Alexander, 382.
45 Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the “Good Enough” Mother* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 76.
51 Collins, 639.
53 Spivak, 102.
54 Schwab, 3.
55 Cahill, 13.
56 Donnell, 128.
57 Francis, 86; Alexander, 382.
58 Oliver, 53, 66.
59 Morris, 966.
62 Ibid., 3.
63 Angeletta KM Gourdine, “Palè Andaki: Genre, History and Mother-Daughter Doublespeak in Edwidge Danticat’s Fiction” in *Reading/Speaking/Writing the Mother*
64 Jacobs, 185, 175.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In her 1919 essay “Notes on Thought and Vision,” modernist poet H. D. presents a concept of creativity and intelligence rooted in mind-body synthesis that she terms the “over-mind.” She describes this phenomenon as “a cap of consciousness” that is “fluid yet with definite body, contained in a definite space,” and likens it to a “jelly-fish.”

While she initially located this state of consciousness in her head, she confesses that she began visualizing it as “centered in the love-region of the body or placed like a foetus in the body” after her first pregnancy. In other words, this viscous, gelatinous substance—“fluid yet with definite body”—resides in her womb, which has the power to both create life and inspire artistic vision. H. D. emphasizes that “this womb-brain or love-brain” is “a jelly-fish in the body,” thus inseparable from a woman’s corporeality and reproductive capabilities.

Significantly, as I discuss in chapter two, the title of Sylvia Plath’s emotionally charged mother/daughter poem “Medusa” may be read both as a reference to a mythological character as well as an allusion to jellyfish, since “medusa” is another term for the jellyfish (medusozoa). Because Aurelia, Plath’s mother’s first name, is also a genus of jellyfish (aurella aulita), “Medusa” serves as a subtle swipe at the poet’s overbearing mother. The jellyfish imagery in the fourth stanza (“Curve of water upleaping/ To my water rod, dazzling and grateful./ Touching and sucking”) portrays the mother as invasive and clingy, sucking the life force out of her daughter. The speaker
repels her mother’s “eely tentacle,” and envisions her as a gelatinous “Blubbery Mary.”

Plath’s poem dramatizes the fusion and separation that occurs between mother and daughter by depicting both women as malleable and pliant: “I shall take no bite of your body,/ Bottle in which I live.”

Written forty-three years apart, these two different jellyfish metaphors point to a prominent theme that I have encountered repeatedly in my research on literary representations of mothers and daughters—that is, the conceptualization of the female body (particularly the maternal body) as fluid and indeterminate, viscous and leaking. While the tentacles of the jellyfish (like the snakes that comprise Medusa’s hair) evoke the image of the phallus, it is the gelatinous, gooey bell—the creature’s central feature—that gives the jellyfish its name, and that incites revulsion in those who cross its path. This same textural quality has traditionally been associated with female corporeality. As Elizabeth Grosz observes in *Volatile Bodies*, throughout Western history, the feminine body has been socially constructed as “a formlessness that engulfs all form…[and] a mode of seepage.” Specifically, I have found that many women writers portray mothers’ bodies as “jelly”—a substance which, in addition to being neither solid nor liquid, brings to mind the gendered expectation that mothers serve as the suppliers of nutritional sustenance. However, these gelatinous depictions of mothers are far from positive and wholesome. Rather, they underscore cultural beliefs regarding the fluidity of the female body and illustrate Kristeva’s theories about the off-putting nature of maternal abjection.

The jelly metaphor is often used to emphasize a mother’s uselessness and insignificance. For instance, in Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood compares her mother to jelly when she visits her in the hospital: “‘They said you called for me.’ She
seemed ready to cry. Her face puckered up and quivered like a pale jelly.” Throughout the novel Plath presents Mrs. Greenwood as clueless and unhelpful, and in this scene, which is the first time Esther sees her mother following her suicide attempt, the description of Mrs. Greenwood’s face quivering “like a pale jelly” renders her weak and repellent. As I note in chapter two, in Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem “Jessie Mitchell’s Mother,” a daughter’s internal monologue when entering a room to tend to her pregnant mother reveals her resentment:

Into her mother’s bedroom to wash the ballooning body.

“My mother is jelly-hearted and she has a brain of jelly:


Only a habit would cry if she should die.

A pleasant sort of fool without the least iron....

Are you better, mother, do you think it will come today?”

In this poem, Jessie Mitchell’s mother is so insignificant that she does not even have a name of her own; she is only defined through her relationship to her children. The daughter believes that her mother’s heart and brain are made of jelly, which denigrates both her emotional and intellectual abilities. The “quiver-soft” quality of the pregnant mother contrasts sharply with the hard “iron” that Jessie perceives as proof of strength, intelligence, and relevance. In both The Bell Jar and “Jessie Mitchell’s Mother,” the daughters assign jelly-like characteristics to their mothers to justify rejecting them.

In Margaret Atwood’s Lady Oracle, this same gelatinous quality illustrates shifting power dynamics in the mother/daughter relationship. In chapter three, I discuss how Joan’s fat body is portrayed as jiggly and unwieldy until she loses weight, and her
desire to “become solid, solid as stone so [her mother] wouldn’t be able to get rid of [her]” shows her recognition that her soft, squishy body incites revulsion. However, in moments when Joan gets the upper hand over Frances, this dynamic shifts. For instance, when Joan arrives home wearing a flashy, unflattering green coat that makes her look like a “neon melon,” she finally establishes dominance over her mother: “She cried hopelessly, passively; she was leaning against the banister, her whole body slack as if she had no bones. My mother has never cried where I could see her and I was dismayed, but elated too at this evidence of my power, my only power.” Joan’s description of Frances’s body going “slack as if she had no bones” gives it a fluid, formless quality, indicating that, like Jessie Mitchell and Esther Greenwood, Joan perceives a weak mother as gelatinous. When Joan attends a meeting of Spiritualists with her Aunt Lou and first learns about the concept of an “astral body” that can “float around by itself, attached to you by something like a long rubber band,” she immediately assigns a textural quality to her mother’s astral body: “I particularly didn’t like the thought of my mother, in the form of some kind of spiritual jello, drifting around after me from place to place.” Joan fears that the aspect of Frances that will haunt her is the same fluid, jelly-like weakness she perceived in her mother’s “boneless” body the day she finally made her cry. Joan also fears her former fat body, which continues to haunt her throughout the novel: “For a moment she hovered around me like ectoplasm, like a gelatin shell, my ghost, my angel; then she settled and I was absorbed into her. Within my former body, I gasped for air.” Since the fat female body conjures images of the prenatal or postnatal body, this “gelatin shell” (like Frances’s haunting “spiritual jello”) also signifies the return of the repressed maternal.
Finally, in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, this indeterminate, viscous material associated with the maternal body takes on racial significance. When Helene, an attractive, “pale yellow” woman, and her daughter Nel accidentally board a train through the car reserved for whites, her deferential and coquettish response to the admonishments of the white conductor inspire ire in two black soldiers who witness the exchange. Nel notices the glare of their “midnight eyes” and their skin hardening into “marble.” Suddenly ashamed of her mother, Nel avoids Helene’s eyes and focuses instead on the hem of her dress:

She could not risk letting [her eyes] travel upward for fear of seeing that the hooks and eyes in the placket of her dress had come undone and exposed the custard-colored skin underneath. She stared at the hem, wanting to believe in its weight but knowing that custard was all that it hid. If this tall, proud woman, this woman who was very particular about her friends, who slipped into church with unequaled elegance, who could quell a roustabout with a look, if *she* were really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too.

Following a moment of disempowerment and public humiliation, Helene’s body becomes “custard” in Nel’s eyes—weakness dissolves her flesh into a gooey, formless mass. Significantly, whereas jelly is transparent and light, custard is opaque and heavy. Since Helene’s humiliation at the hands of the white conductor is specifically racialized, the opacity of the gelatinous substance that Nel assigns her mother seems to convey intersectional revulsion—disgust for her fluid female form as well as loathing for her light brown skin. Nel declares right then and there that she will never suffer the same fate: “It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard—always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no
midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly.” The fact that it is the men who have the power to “turn her into jelly” exemplifies the misogyny behind the conceptualization of the female body as leaking, indeterminate, and gelatinous. In projecting such qualities onto their mothers, daughters like Nel, Esther, Jessie, and Joan reveal that they have internalized these same hegemonic beliefs. Nel’s fear that there is “a chance” that she is “really custard” like Helene is the fear that her feminine body will circumscribe her life, like it has for her mother.

These jelly/custard metaphors offer an entry point for unraveling the misogyny at the heart of Western conceptions of the female body. In Being and Nothingness, Jean-Paul Sartre examines the revulsion that viscous substances instinctively incite (he uses the French term “visqueux,” which has no exact English equivalent but is often translated as “slimy” or “sticky”). He claims that “the slimy” has a quality “which is neither material (and physical) nor psychic, but which transcends the opposition of the psychic and the physical, by revealing itself to us as the ontological expression of the entire world.” As neither solid nor liquid, viscous substances are “a phenomenon in process of becoming,” and thus unsettle us because they resist categorization, as well as solidification. Additionally, they threaten our own solidity. Whereas diving into the water is safe because “I remain a solid in its liquidity,” submersion in the slimy initiates an existential crisis: “If I sink in the slimy, I feel that I am going to be lost in it; that is, I may dissolve in the slime precisely because the slimy is in process of solidification.” In Purity and Danger, Mary Douglas draws from Sartre’s work on viscosity to support her arguments regarding the role of dirt in different contexts and cultures. She writes, “stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between myself and it,”
and claims that Sartre’s theory of viscosity “makes the point that we can and do reflect with profit on our main classifications and on experiences which do not exactly fit them. In general these reflections confirm our confidence in the main classifications.”20 In other words, the disgust and horror we experience when encountering a viscous substance—which does not fit neatly into any of our cultural categorizations—affirms and reifies the societal boundaries and classifications that help us make sense of the world. Significant, Sartre imagines the slimy as specifically feminine. He writes, “It is a soft, yielding action, a moist and feminine sucking, it lives obscurely under my fingers, and I sense it like a dizziness; it draws me to it as the bottom of a precipice might draw me.”21 Like the “Touching and sucking” maternal jellyfish figure in Plath’s “Medusa,” Sartre’s slime “draws me, it sucks at me.”22 Also like Plath’s fierce Medusa, the viscous is vengeful: “Slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet, feminine revenge which will be symbolized on another level by the quality ‘sugary.’”23 Regarding how to contend with anomalies that do not fit neatly into any of our established cultural categories, Douglas writes, “Negatively, we can ignore, just not perceive them, or perceiving we can condemn. Positively we can deliberately confront the anomaly and try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place.”24 Notably, the first example Douglas presents of one of these “anomalies” is the case of a “monstrous birth,” which is also inescapably feminine.25 Grosz points out the misogynistic underpinnings of both Sartre’s and Douglas’s theorizations of viscosity, and identifies what she believes to be the true cause of our aversion: “It is not that female sexuality is like, resembles, an inherently horrifying viscosity. Rather, it is the production of an order that renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous that constitutes the sticky
and the viscous with their disgusting, horrifying connotations.” Here, Grosz reverses the causality: in other words, women’s bodies are not repellent because they are sticky and viscous—the sticky and viscous are repellent because they are affiliated with women’s bodies.

Douglas’s discussion of viscosity as an “anomaly” to either ignore, condemn, or confront and conform, along with her and Sartre’s association of the viscous with femininity, begs the question: how can the female body be an “anomaly,” when at least half of the population inhabits one? Of course, to attempt to adequately address the origins of this absurd inequality, we would need to delve into the very origins of Western philosophical thought itself (which is beyond the scope of this dissertation), but perhaps this question can help us better understand the mother/daughter relationship, because, to use Douglas’s formula, the patriarchy has devoted considerable energy to ignoring, condemning, and confronting and conforming the “anomaly” of the female body for centuries, and since, as Adrienne Rich observes, “the relationship between mother and daughter has been profoundly threatening to men,” perhaps it should come as no surprise that the patriarchy has made sure that the job of suppressing and controlling the “anomaly” of feminine corporeality has infiltrated (and often poisoned) the mother/daughter relationship. Because at the root of this male hysteria over the leaking, viscous female body is fear—not of weakness, but of strength.

While Sartre discusses the repellant quality of the “slimy,” he also emphasizes its power. He writes that it is “the image of destruction-creation…Only at the very moment when I believe that I possess it, behold by a curious reversal, it possesses me.” Sartre presents viscosity like a material manifestation of the Hindu god Shiva—tricky and
deceptive, as well as able to destroy and create in order to remake the world. This
destroyer/creator archetype also brings to mind Kristeva’s theories regarding maternal
abjection, wherein the maternal body is both the giver of life and a horrifying threat to the
subject’s sense of self. Indeed, Kristeva draws from both Sartre and Douglas in her
writings on abjection, and Grosz has observed the sexism in her work, too. According
to Sartre, not only can the viscous destroy and create, it is also, as aforementioned, “the
ontological expression of the entire world.” He goes even further, claiming that “it
transcends all distinctions between psychic and physical, between the brute existent and
the meanings of the world; it is a possible meaning of being.” For Sartre, the
consummate existentialist, to define viscosity as “a possible meaning of being” is
significant. He seems in awe of its power, yet distrustful of it at the same time. Therefore,
it is notable that, in addition to overtly assigning viscosity feminine qualities, the
language he uses to describe its danger has misogynistic undertones: “like the supreme
docility of the possessed,” “there exists a poisonous possession,” “it is a trap,” “there is a
sly solidarity and complicity of all its leechlike parts.” There is little doubt that, for
Sartre, the viscous is female…and terrifying.

To return to our jelly-averse daughters for a moment, I want to propose that the
young women’s fear of the gelatinous mother is not only the result of internalized
misogyny, but also a fear of the vulnerability inherent in feminine strength. If Grosz is
correct that the sticky and viscous are repulsive because they have historically been
associated with the female body (and not the other way around), then the indeterminate,
fluid quality of a body capable of creating and birthing other bodies—arguably the most
powerful, awe-inspiring ability of any body—has inspired a fear so great that any
substance that even approximates the same textural quality has the power to destabilize our sense of self. But, as Sartre notes, the power of the viscous lies in its indeterminacy and mutability. In other words, because it lacks solidity, yet still retains its coherence, viscosity is both vulnerable and resilient, susceptible and tenacious. That this simultaneous vulnerability and strength is fundamentally necessary for the female body’s most awe-inspiring and powerful act (i.e., birth) confuses and frightens men like Sartre, who prefer to think in binaries, and who have traditionally been the ones writing the philosophical tracts that tell us how to feel about bodies. When daughters like Esther, Jessie, Joan, and Nel compare their mothers to jelly or custard in moments of perceived weakness, perhaps it is because they sense this double bind—that fully stepping into strength as a woman requires inhabiting vulnerability, which is far scarier than embodying strength alone.

H. D.’s imagining of the dualistic “over-mind” capable of intellectual brilliance and artistic vision as a jellyfish in the womb presents a recuperative and subversive interpretation of the malleability and power of the feminine body. She seems to recognize this subversion when she writes, “The world of vision has been symbolised in all ages by various priestly cults in all countries by the serpent. In my personal language or vision, I call this serpent a jelly-fish.” In Judeo-Christian cosmology, the serpent, of course, evokes Eve in the Garden of Eden, disobeying the law of the Father in her pursuit of knowledge. H. D.’s “jelly-fish consciousness,” then, threatens the patriarchal order through both its creative and intellectual potential and its indeterminate materiality. Therefore, H. D.’s approach to the “jelly” of femininity provides a helpful way of
theorizing the simultaneous vulnerability and strength of female corporeality that has unsettled men for centuries.

But, of course, it is not just men who have been unsettled by this duality. It has unsettled women, too. It has unsettled me. From a very early age, I wanted nothing to do with it. I dreaded the onset of my period, hoping that I would somehow magically be spared from experiencing that disturbing female rite of passage, and I first realized that I never wanted to have children around the same time that I stopped playing with dolls. Raised in a matriarchal home, I was dominated by the fleshy bodies and indomitable personalities of my mother and grandmother, whose power and strength I found breathtaking and, at times, terrifying. Even more terrifying were their moments of weakness, when the veil of indestructibility dropped and, like Nel, I saw the custard concealed underneath. They instilled in me the compulsion to regulate and control my body—a mostly impossible task that they themselves did not seem capable of accomplishing—because they knew, like Jessie Mitchell, that iron was more culturally palatable than jelly.

Perhaps I took the easy way out. Like Eudora Welty’s Miss Eckhart, or Jamaica Kincaid’s Xuela, I chose to remain a perpetual daughter, never participating in the ultimate female rite of passage that would have rendered me “a horrifying, devouring body…that evokes rage and fear.”34 I have thus had the privilege of analyzing and theorizing maternal abjection without having to wade into its viscous muck. I will try to remember this fact as I write my next creative nonfiction book about my relationships with my mother and grandmother, and I will keep in mind Rich’s observation, “Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon

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Indeed, the process of writing this dissertation has changed the central question that will guide the book I intend to write about the women in my matrilineage. For a long time, I thought I already knew the question I needed to answer through my writing: Why did the women in my family hate each other so much? However, the last few years of researching the “essential female tragedy” has helped me find a more fitting (and possibly more heartbreaking) one: Why couldn’t we love each other? In other words, what prevented us from openly expressing our love? Why was it so dangerous to be vulnerable with the one person with whom we had been the most vulnerable?

In Sula, Morrison seems to address this paradox in two exchanges between Hannah and her mother Eva, the three-legged matriarch of the family. When Hannah asks, “Mamma, did you ever love us?”, Eva’s hand instinctively travels down to her stump of a leg, insinuating that she has made corporeal sacrifices for love that her children do not even know about. After admonishing Hannah for asking the question and telling stories of the misery and deprivation that she pulled her and her brother through as young children, Eva says, “what you talkin’ ‘bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you.” The next day, when Eva sees Hannah catch on fire in the yard from her second-floor bedroom, she breaks the window and hurls herself out of it in an attempt to “cover her daughter’s body with her own,” but misses her mark and fails. With these two scenes, Morrison poignantly conveys the complex, visceral, and tacit love that exists between a mother and daughter. Perhaps a mother “cover[ing] her daughter’s body with her own” to try to protect it is the perfect metaphor for the tragedy of the mother/daughter relationship: a mother attempts to smother her daughter to save her, yet only loses her in the process.
The two women in my life who sought to cover my body with their own never had to hurl themselves out of a window for me, but I have no doubt that they would have, if such a situation had arisen. Instead, their attempts to save me manifested in everyday interactions in which they tried to teach me how to become the woman that they wanted to be—one who “marries rich” and never gets mocked or rejected for her fat body. My mother and grandmother did their best to instill in me a hatred of the feminine jelly associated with fatness—with the jiggly bellies, bulbous bottoms, and overall gelatinous physiques that are culturally coded as weak and evidence of a lack of self-control—because they feared that inhabiting such jelly would only limit my choices in life. While they may have been correct during their lifetimes, cultural beliefs about women’s bodies have been changing in the early twenty-first century. From the explosion of the body positivity and fat activism movements, to a growing acceptance of and appreciation for ethnically diverse bodies, to the increased visibility of fat bodies in popular culture, the stage has been set for a massive ideological shift regarding the utility, beauty, and power of gelatinous bodies. Perhaps society is finally on the verge of embracing the vulnerability inherent in feminine strength—of admitting viscosity as “the ontological expression of the entire world.” Notably, the R&B group Destiny’s Child seemed to anticipate this cultural shift in their 2001 song “Bootylicious,” when Beyoncé challenged America, “I don’t think you’re ready for this jelly.”  

Maybe we are, Beyoncé. Maybe we finally are.
2 Ibid., 20.
3 Ibid., 22.
4 Ibid., 60.
10 Ibid., 84.
11 Ibid., 107.
12 Ibid., 321.
14 Ibid., 22.
15 Ibid.
17 Sartre, 606.
18 Ibid., 607.
19 Ibid., 610.
21 Sartre, 609.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Douglas, 38.
25 Ibid., 39.
26 Grosz, 195.
28 Sartre, 608.
29 See Grosz, 198-208. Grosz points out that Kristeva frames seminal fluid as a “nonpolluting” bodily fluid, yet associates menstrual blood with excrement (206).
30 Sartre, 606.
31 Ibid., 611.
32 Ibid., 609, 610.
33 H. D., 40.
36 Rich, 237.
37 Morrison, 67.
38 Ibid., 69.
39 Ibid., 75.
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