

The Death of the Gynopolitics and the Birth of Black Cultural Motherhood in *The Confessions of Frannie Langton*

“I’d seen it, of course, during the years that followed, who she was to me; there was, after all, only one woman it could have been. All those times I’d asked her, perhaps I was just waiting for her to tell me. She hated me sometimes. But I believe there was love there, too.”

- Frannie Langton, *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* (349)

For motherhood to exist in the enslaved archive, it is demarcated to the position of perpetual siege where the “mother” is relegated to the position of the invisible woman on demonic grounds¹. There is, I assert, no archive of motherhood, but instead only an archive of gynopolitics — concerned only with the sexual and reproductive qualities of the Black, enslaved female body. This resistance is present in the character of Frannie as well as other female characters in her story. Frannie, though not a mother herself, is surrounded by motherhood. Frannie’s acts of rebellion, though seemingly sparked by proximity to reproductivity and infants, are truly instigated by encounters with motherhood. Phibbah, Frannie’s biological mother, engages in “adjacent mothering” as a protective method for both herself and Frannie, which results in Phibbah’s death without Frannie’s knowledge of her maternity. When Frannie is confronted with the albino baby, it is not the baby that incites Frannie’s burning of the coach-house, but it is the threat of lost maternity as the mother begs and cries for her child outside the coach-house. Finally, it is not fertility that kills Madame, but the loss of motherhood, and that loss propels Frannie to kill Mr. Benham. Through an analysis of the female characters in *The Confessions of Frannie Langton*, this essay explores the way in which motherhood, often seen only as biological reproduction and as a way of relegating the female enslaved peoples to a

¹See McKittrick, Katherine. “Demonic Grounds: Sylvia Wynter.” *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006, pp. 123–141.

position of invisibility on Katherine McKittrick's demonic grounds, creates its own resistance through the proliferation of a cultural motherhood seemingly invisible in the archive.

In 1807, the British Slave Trade was abolished restricting plantation owners from selling and/or purchasing enslaved persons. Though slavery itself remained an *official* part of the British Empire until 1833, the practice of slavery remained deeply embedded in the culture of Caribbean plantation life long after it was abolished. Unable to purchase enslaved persons, plantation owners relied heavily on the *reproduction* of their current enslaved population. This resulted in a growing interest in captive reproductivity, something previously seen as a "waste" of labor. The growing focus on reproductivity on the Caribbean plantation revealed a shocking deficit in the reproductive rates of the Caribbean enslaved populations in respect to the enslaved populations of the Americas. Between 1817 and 1832, data recorded from two separate Jamaican sugar plantations and American plantations, revealed that in America, 112 babies were born for every 1,000 "woman-years," while in the Caribbean, only 64 babies were born for every 1,000 woman-years (Morgan 233). After the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the population of Jamaica dropped 12% (43,000) largely due to an aging workforce with naturally lower rates of reproduction (Morgan 232). The dip in reproductive rates were of specific interest to those who profited from the plantation economy, such as Matthew Lewis, who observed in his trip to Westmoreland estate in 1817 that, "in spite of all indulgences and inducements, more than twelve or thirteen children have been added annually list of births" (Lewis 320). While historians have attempted to determine the scientific reasons behind a declining rate in reproductivity, there has been no clear consensus. As is imaginable, most historians believe poor nutrition and intense labor contributed to the female ability to reproduce. Other historians point to the rapidly aging population of pre-slave-trade-abolishment as a primary reason for the decline in reproductivity.

Most important to my exploration of cultural motherhood as resistance, however, is Morgan's interpretation of another possible reason for a decline in reproduction.

A second line of interpretation emphasizes agency of slave women in resisting biological reproduction as statement against the system of slavery. This view focuses on strategies deployed to avoid pregnancy and acts undertaken to curtail pregnancies and unwanted births, such as abortion and infanticide. In this analysis, slave women assume the major role in determining the predisposition to pregnancy and the decisions then taken about babies over the nine-month cycle and in the first weeks. (234)

Through Morgan's interpretation of reproduction as a place ripe for enslaved female agency, I want to argue for the creation of a cultural motherhood otherwise rendered invisible in the present archive. I use the term gynopolitics in the remainder of my essay as a variation on Foucault's "biopolitics." Foucault's term largely focuses on the individual's right to choose life or death for themselves. In the case of the enslaved Caribbean population and their power over their bodies, this power belonged to the plantation owner. In her article, "Zombie Biopolitics," Elizabeth Maddock Dillon uses the example of Colonel Walrond to demonstrate the way in which enslaved bodies had no control over their lives or their deaths. She narrates the story as follows:

In the late 1640s Colonel Walrond, a plantation owner in the colony of Barbados, decapitated the body of an enslaved African man who had committed suicide rather than labor for Walrond in the Caribbean. Walrond placed the man's head on a twelve-foot pole... killing oneself, Walrond sought to demonstrate, was not a way to escape the living death of Caribbean enslavement — not a way to effect natal repatriation in body or spirit (625)

Employing a different interpretation of biopolitics — one largely concerned with the idea of the African afterlife and/or the ability to control one's body after death — Dillon focuses on the dehumanization of the enslaved body as “zombie.” As she defines it, “the dehumanized body of the enslaved African is *forced* to live in order to work without respite” (626). Like Dillon, my use of “gynopolitics” focuses on the *choice* one has over life and death, yet here, I am focusing specifically on the *gendered* choice of reproduction: the ability to choose to *create* life. This choice, I argue, is depicted in the archive of Caribbean slavery through the journals of Matthew Lewis and the data collected by scholars such as Morgan and Dillon, not as choice, but as the responsibility of the enslaved female body. In the archive, the lack of reproduction present in the West Indies is primarily documented and described as a biological symptom of the *dehumanized* body of the enslaved African as, despite a growing interest in enslaved reproductivity, the role of the enslaved “mother” remained relatively inconsequential. In her article, “African Caribbean Slave Mothers and Children: Traumas of Dislocation and Enslavement Across the Atlantic,” Barbara Bush asserts that “the exigencies of slavery demanded a counter representation of African women’s fertility, an ‘unmothering motif’ contingent upon the essential productive role of the enslaved women in the plantation economy” (70). The figure of the enslaved mother is *forced* to (re)produce for political and economic gain. This, I want to argue, is the dominant narrative of enslaved motherhood.

Yet, despite the overwhelming focus on the politics of reproduction (i.e. gynopolitics), African captives maintained and demonstrated ways of motherhood culturally, not biologically, determined. In her article, Bush attempts to historicize African motherhood prior to enslavement. She asserts that, though we cannot know the intricacies of each sub-Saharan African society, it is generally understood that motherhood saw “a world view and family structure that links the child

to a complex network of relationships embracing ancestors and the spirit world as well as living kin” (72). Pregnancy, both celebrated and feared, became a communal experience where the woman was showered in rituals and prayers for a safe delivery. As dangerous as childbirth was on the plantation, it was equally hazardous in African societies, though this was often refuted by the European sentiment that African women were “assumed to be physically robust and allegedly gave birth easily, with the same ease as animals and without much pain” (Bush 72). The survival of enslaved newborns was tenuous, surrounded by rituals to help ensure the vitality of the infant; however, soon these practices were “regarded as antithetic to the civilizing mission” and enslavers required Christian baptism “regardless of the wishes of their parents” (Bush 74). Through the perpetuation of European assumptions of enslaved motherhood and the ever present rejection of African spiritual practices, motherhood on the plantation was seen as distant and neglectful. Further enforcing ideas of distant and neglectful motherhood, enslaved mothers were often forced to return to work only days after giving birth and children were relegated to old women, often referred to as “nannies.” As the children aged, “nannies” were required to lead the children in light tasks and were “responsible for administering discipline and ensuring young children were socialized in plantation life” (Bush 82). Refusing to acknowledge the role of the community as “part of an extended family” and the child as “cared for by a number of other people,” enslaved motherhood is mistakenly documented singularly biologically through the lens of white, European motherhood (Bush 75). Depictions such as these of the enslaved mother as uncaring and unkind, render the archive of black enslaved motherhood an archive of gynopolitics, concerned only with reproduction for political means — as a way to “cheat” the abolition of the slave trade and still amass enslaved peoples.

What is distinctly missing from the archive of enslaved female reproduction, representations of cultural motherhood, is displayed through Sara Collins' *The Confessions of Frannie Langton*. Frannie's narrative, including her exploration of Miss-Bella, Phibbah, and Madame alike, demonstrate the way in which cultural perceptions of motherhood created and shaped a culture *apart* from the dominant, white narrative of gynopolitics. In this way, Frannie's narrative demonstrates the way in which conceptions of cultural motherhood persisted and challenged the dominant ideologies of European parenthood creating the potential for what Katherine McKittrick would categorize as an insurgent space. Bush so aptly describes this process in her article.

The durability of such cultural knowledge is evidence of the enslaved peoples' ability to adapt to a system of enslavement which severed the family and community relationships... rendered relations between mothers and children insecure and precarious, and consistently sought to eradicate or modify enslaved peoples' cultural beliefs around mothering and parenthood. (77)

In the same way Frannie is relegated to the place of uncertainty and unknowability on McKittrick's demonic grounds, her narrative demonstrates the ways in which these gynopolitical spaces can be used *against* themselves.

Before diving directly into conversations about motherhood in *The Confessions of Frannie Langton*, it is important to note the difference between fertility, motherhood, and the conversations surrounding the term I am using to describe their political allocations and position in the archive. First, the archive I am addressing in this essay is the most basic use of the term "archive". It refers to texts recorded and published between 1662 and 1900 that detail the practice of slavery in the West Indies. These texts range from new articles to journal entries to

fictionalized accounts of plantains in the Caribbean. Looking at a prominent text from the archive, Matthew Lewis' journal depicts African enslaved women as both sexual and fertile. Lewis is one voice in the archive that rejects the "unmothering motif" of enslaved females, but rather suggests that while they may be "tender mother[s]... so heedless and unattentive are the best intentioned [enslaved] mothers" (97). These mothers, though having birthed six to eight children in their lifetime, are considered by Lewis to be lacking in the motherly instinct of protection. Thus, it seems the rearing of children by enslaved women is firmly based only on sexuality and fertility rather than motherhood. An enslaved woman with children may call herself a "mother," but her motherhood is "lacking" and is only a product of her fertility and sexual exploitation. Enslaved women are denied any selfhood linked to motherhood. The preoccupation with enslaved female fertility and sexuality in European accounts of enslaved female reproduction that is concerned only with *productivity* and discounts the prefix "re-"s implication of futurity is what I am calling gynopolitics. By rejecting the "re-" and its implication of repetition, gynopolitics strips the female enslaved body of her agency and selfhood *within* motherhood and focuses on the politics of the sexualized, fertile body.

Looking at Hortense Spillers in my conversations surrounding the place of fertility and motherhood and the enslaved female body, her article, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," speaks extensively about female reproductivity and the familial structure in the enslaved communities of the Caribbean. This application of her work focuses primarily on her opening remarks concerning the practice of "naming." She begins by noting the way in which historical practices of "naming" and identifying enslaved women consist of "overdetermined nominative properties" (257). Though speaking in broader terms and commenting on the sexualization and exploitation of enslaved bodies, her idea of names as

“markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean” can be applied to the term “mother” or “motherhood” as well (257). While European motherhood was viewed as motherhood *proper*, the birthing and raising of children by enslaved females was deprived of the ideas of “motherhood-proper” and instead seen only as *fertility*. As Spillers asserts, this naming of black enslaved motherhood as fertility created a space that was embedded with historical assumptions of promiscuity and immorality that prevented black enslaved motherhood from reclaiming its place in the enslaved family structure. Fertility and sexuality were performed *on* the body of the enslaved female. Having little control over how and when their physical body was exploited, enslaved females opted to regulate what occurred *within* it in an attempt “for the agents buried beneath them [the names] to come clean” (Spillers 257). Phibbah’s “old knowledge” learned from her mother allowed her to control her body in a way unknown and unthinkable to Langton: “If there was one person on that whole estate who knew how a woman could go about saving herself from children she didn’t want, it was your mother” (348). Phibbah encourages Frannie to retain this knowledge because “so long as you carried it in your head they couldn’t take it away” (33). Yet, Frannie learns that she, herself, was the single failed attempt of Phibbah’s contraceptive herbs. It is those same herbs, alongside Frannie, that play a key role in Phibbah’s death. It is important to note, however, that Phibbah’s control over her reproductive body is not representative of motherhood itself, but instead an example of control over *fertility*. Phibbah does not reject motherhood, but instead the idea that she *must* be fertile — to escape the notion of maturation as a betrayal. Frannie echoes the sentiment of body betrayal two years post Phibbah’s death when she begins menstruation: “then came the day I saw blood on the cotton drawers I’d sewn myself... one more thing to hide... time has its way with all of us, whether we like it or not” (45). At the crux of this

maturation, Frannie attempts to exert control over her own body by controlling when and where she is sexually exploited. She attempts to entice Langton's sexual attention to "hurry it along" herself (50). While neither Frannie nor Phibbah nor women in their positions could control what was done to their bodies, they could control what their bodies did. In this way, Frannie and Phibbah exert a sort of agency through their sexuality and mediation of fertility.

While her fertility and sexuality are places in which Phibbah can exert agency over her physical body, it is specifically through motherhood that she is able to create her own self-hood. Phibbah, who we later discover is Frannie's biological mother, serves both as an example of the European desire for an "unmothering motif" in the plantation society and the way in which motherhood provided space for creating a specific perception of oneself. Phibbah is described by Frannie as doing "nothing but curse[ing]," recalling Phibbah's constant irritation with her as a young girl: "*Ga-lang*, pickney, just get out of my way. Why can't you just leave me be?" (16). Even without her biological connection to Frannie, Phibbah's rejection of Frannie, or any child for that matter, serves to enforce the European idea of the enslaved mother as uncaring and distant, as lacking in basic maternal instinct. When Frannie asks Phibbah about her mother, Phibbah replies by saying her "mother had run off. 'You won't magic one up by asking, '... 'You going to learn. We not the ones ask the questions, we the ones answer them. And the answer always yes'" (16). Phibbah refrains from words of comfort often attributed with a "mothering" instinct and instead encourages Frannie to stop asking questions. As is revealed later in the novel, the account Phibbah gives is the account of herself after giving birth to Frannie. She attempts to run away only to be captured and returned to Paradise, her missing teeth a product of her attempted escape. Despite Phibbah's "unconventional" mothering, Frannie is nonetheless drawn to her company as she recalls, "mostly I trailed the house, thinking of ways I could stick

to Phibbah, like an apron” (16). Unaware of any biological attachment, Frannie sees Phibbah as a mothering-figure, instructing her, telling her stories, feeding her, caring for her. Phibbah’s response to Frannie’s attachment, her desire to be “unknown” to Frannie while also being a part of her life, allows for her to create her own version of herself *apart* from Miss-bella and Langton’s interpretations of her behavior. Despite a seeming rejection of Frannie as her daughter in the literal, biological, and European sense, she takes the position of Frannie’s mother and remains a part of Frannie’s life even after her death.

The relationship between “the women of Paradise,” specifically that of Miss-bella and Phibbah, acutely demonstrates the way in which the perpetuation of the “unmothering motif” was strictly a gynopolitical attempt to dismantle enslaved familial structures (Collins 20). Miss-bella, as both the scorned lover of Langton and the power-hungry white woman, asserts the narrative of an uncaring nature on Phibbah and Frannie’s relationship through her manipulation of Phibbah. She is acutely aware of Phibbah’s love for Frannie. In a conversation between the pair, Phibbah suggests Miss-bella sit outside for a change of scenery to brighten her mood.

“‘That’s precisely why I could not.’ She flicked her a look, sharp, over her shoulder. ‘But you know about that.’

‘About what?’

‘Wanting a thing so much you can’t bear looking at it.’” (21)

Foreshadowing this interaction, only four pages earlier, Frannie recounts how Phibbah would silently leave her peas when she was picking in the morning. Frannie recounts, “she tapped her hand beside her in the dirt, it meant she’d set a few there for me, beside the washbin... but she’d never turn, *never look at me*” (17, emphasis added). Despite the attempt to de-maternalize the enslaved population, Miss-bella is aware of Phibbah’s desire to mother Frannie, a desire she

suppresses for her own safety and that of Frannie's; however, Miss-bella will stop at nothing to disrupt this desire. In her letter to Frannie, Miss-bella reveals that “she [Phibbah] is, I supposed, the reason I was kind to you at the start. I wanted to hurt her. I even made sure I was the one to name you, that she'd have not even that small serving of a mother's joy” (348). After Langton brought his “bastard child” into her home, Miss-bella sought to delegitimize the enslaved woman's claim to her child by asserting that it “seems I must be some sort of mother to you now” (348, 14). In a final attempt to dislocate the innate bond between Frannie and Phibbah, Miss-bella forces Phibbah to whip Frannie for destroying her book. Frannie notes that during the occasion, “Miss-bella stood silent, arms folded, face as smooth as milk. When I looked up it was Phibbah she was watching, not me. Her narrow smile stretched between them, tight as sewn thread” (26). Through this staring altercation, it is Phibbah that gives in first, relinquishing Frannie and looking away from Miss-bella's glare. Phibbah attempts to alert Frannie to this manipulation of their relationship, though she cannot say the true extent of it, by asking Frannie to question her role in the household: “You never stop to think why is *you* get pick? You think is luck? Only you could think is luck” (27). Her warning is two-fold. It is not just that Frannie is Phibbah's daughter, but that she is Langton's also, and thus a target for Miss-bella's cruelty.

Though Phibbah is physically deprived of her position as “mother” in the European sense of the term, her relationship to Frannie suggests enslaved motherhood existed beyond white conceptions of maternity. As Frannie moves through new spaces, encounters new challenges, Phibbah's voice is the voice that follows her, chastises her, and encourages her. Though “no one ever spoke Phibbah's name again,” Frannie recounts “nothing ever blocks Phibbah” (44, 343). Even before Miss-bella reveals Phibbah's relationship to Frannie, Frannie suggests she'd “seen it, of course, during the years that followed, who she was to me” (349). While this sentiment can

be taken literally to mean that Frannie understood soon after Phibbah's death that she was biologically her mother, another reading implies that regardless of biology, Phibbah *was* Frannie's mother. Being otherwise motherless, Phibbah was the only figure to which Frannie could directly relate to. Though Miss-bella suggests filling this role, though only to spite Phibbah, Frannie is barred from forming an attachment with the white concept of motherhood as she notes, "I never knew my mother but here was the plain fact looking us both in the eye... no one such as herself had ever birthed the likes of me in the history of our hot little part of the earth" (14). The idea of motherhood constructed through Phibbah is one of protection: not just of Frannie (the child), but of the concept of motherhood. When Langton suspects Miss-bella is being poisoned and questions Frannie, Phibbah once again attempts to protect Frannie by asking Langton not to "bring her into it" (39). When Langton ignores Phibbah's request and pressures Frannie to answer his question honestly, Frannie reveals Phibbah's "seasoning" in Miss-bella's orangeade. Though shocked by this confession, Phibbah retains her role as a mother and does not "speak up for her own self" (40). Phibbah dies, and in her last act of motherhood, protects Frannie from any harm that may have come from the discovery that the herbs were not, in fact, poison, but contraceptives.

English cruelty to enslaved mothers in Frannie's narrative does not end with Phibbah, nor does the desire to protect the cultural motherhood present in enslaved communities. Touching on the scientific push of the time to determine the *biology* of the enslaved African in order to *politically* oppress them, Langton and his associate, George Benham, are interested in exploring reproduction and its political implications: specifically, how does the skin tone of the mother and father of an infant, and subsequently the infant's skin tone, affect sensibilities? Frannie, an experiment in and of herself, is tasked with observing and sampling an albino baby procured by

Langton. After asking her to take a sample of the infant's skin, Frannie objects, first stating that "the child was too young, should not be separated from his mother" (335). Langton interprets Frannie's concern for the child as fear of causing the child pain claiming, "'Pickney going hardly feel it'" (335). Yet, it seems, Frannie is not concerned with the child's pain, but the mother outside waiting for her baby's return. At this moment, Frannie identifies as both the infant and the mother. She recognizes the similarities she and this child share as experiments of enslaved breeding. She, the product of Langton and Phibbah, was "taught for spite" to procure "the very thing he [Langton] needed, to tempt Benham's interest" (337). But, she also has the power to provide the community and protection Phibbah afforded her and help the child break free and return to his mother. As she lifts the baby from his slumber, she asserts "hate twisted in my chest. And dread, too" (337). She actively subverts the "mothering" instinct of holding a child, and instead converts this energy into agency. As she holds the child, listening to his mother "through the door, trying not to sound angry, trying to sound like she was begging instead," she decides to take action: "Intention had flown in, when I'd held that baby. I knew I was going to set that fire" (337-8). As both the once-mothered (the infant) and the mothering (the mother), Frannie uses this position of motherhood, more connected with the communal, non-biological understanding of motherhood, to enact agency and temporarily destroy Langton's research. In order to protect the cultural motherhood, Frannie must burn the coach-house down.

After relocating to England, Frannie attempts to retain and protect her ideas of motherhood that are challenged by Madame's unexpected pregnancy. Not only is Madame pregnant with another man's baby, but it is the baby of a formerly enslaved man. To avoid the controversy, Frannie is expected to take the child and raise it as her own: "'And do what with it?'" Benham shrugged. 'What do you mean, gel? Whatever you want. It'll be nothing to do with

us” (279). Like the baby in the coach-house, Frannie sees herself both in the potential of the infant and in the place of the mother. The infant, a product of a wealthy, white European and a formerly enslaved African, will be multi-racial like herself. But, Madame’s desire for the child, a desire she, herself, is surprised by, mimics the mother outside of the coach-house begging for the return of her child. She tells Frannie, “One of the mercies of my marriage has been to discover that I would never want *his* children. Now he tells me I must not want *this* one. But it is as if –’ she stopped ‘– as if *this* baby has come with some trick that shows me how to want it,”(281). Through this sentiment, Madame demonstrates the idea of inherent motherhood given to white European women but denied to enslaved females. *This* child, now situated in her womb, has endowed her with the capacity to *want* to be a mother. Frannie, on the other hand, is not offered any such inherent feelings. Instead, the idea of motherhood is thrust upon her under the pressures of hurting the woman she loves by denying her child and causing her divorce. In the end, Frannie is not able to make any such decision about the future of Madame’s child as “the baby had finally let go” (355). Madame, faced with the premature death of her child, “lay curled around it,” only to follow her child in death soon after: “‘I think it – it has broken me,’ she said. I didn’t need to ask what she meant... Before I went down to ask Benham to fetch the doctor, I’d thought she was sick, sleeping. Now I see that she must have been dying, even then” (361, 364). Madame, in a position of privileged motherhood, is inherently given the mothering motifs of love for her unborn child and grief when her child passes. Madame chooses preservation of the self by relegating the child to Frannie, rather than protecting her motherhood. Madame’s choice of “self” over maternity challenges Frannie’s notions of motherhood, as for Frannie, the preservation of self is inherently bound to ideas of motherhood.

Much like the burning of the coach-house, it is the desire to protect her own conceptions of motherhood that propel Frannie to kill Benham. After discovering Madame has lost the child, Benham remarks it was “perfect timing, of course” and declares he has no “further use” for Frannie (358). Frannie insists she is staying, retiring to the party, and then returning to Benham’s after discovering Madame is unwell. Benham dismisses Frannie’s concern, relieved Madame is no longer threatened by ‘undesirable’ motherhood, and instead is concerned with the “nasty little gossips” at the party who knew about Madame’s previous condition. Dismissing both the feelings of Madame and Frannie, Benham is only concerned with his own reputation. Frannie springs into action, berating Benham, demonstrating all the ways in which she could ruin his reputation *without* the child, and when he does not take kindly to the threat, she attacks him. Though the child is deceased, Frannie retains a protective attachment to the life she could have had both with the child and with Madame. Madame, wanting to bury the child, had Frannie preserve it in arsenic and after Madame dies, it becomes the only thing left that was shared between herself and Frannie. When Frannie sees the baby in the courtroom, it is not a “creature” or a “fetus,” it is “*the baby*: (6). It is Madame’s baby. But, it is also Frannie’s baby.

Frannie’s narrative, thus, is not a rejection of maternity, but overall a rejection of the notion of fertility as a defining characteristic of the enslaved female demonstrated through her relationship with Madame. As a same-sex relationship, Madame and Frannie, though each may be fertile, cannot conceive a child with one another. Their relationship is inherently based on sexual pleasure (and love, in Frannie’s case) rather than fertility. Frannie’s relationship with Madame exists as a counter to Phibbah’s relationship with Langton, the same relationship that produced Frannie. While Phibbah seeks to regulate her fertility, Frannie escapes fertility through her relationship with Madame. Though Frannie escapes fertility, she does not escape maternity

as she is tasked with raising Madame's unborn child. In this way, it is fertility that Frannie's narrative rejects, not maternity.

I want to end this essay with an exploration of the first and the last lines of Frannie's narrative to suggest that Frannie's preoccupation with birth and infants is in fact a preoccupation with motherhood and the space it creates for agency and self-creation. For Frannie, this space is her own story. Frannie begins her narrative with the line, "My trail starts the way my life did: a squall of elbows and shoving and spit" (3). She details her birth, though impossible she could remember the details of her own coming into this world, as a struggle to emerge. Like that of the birth stories, Frannie's narrative *struggles* to retain its position as the dominant narrative. She confesses "no one expects any kind of story from a woman like me" and pushes against the notion that the account of the crime is the account of the prisoner. Throughout the novel, the story being told is Frannie's own story that "only I [she] can tell" (8). In the final pages of her story, Frannie remarks she has set aside some money and the means for her work to be published and printed with the hope that "perhaps someone will be interested in all of this" (370). Sal, her friend from the school-house, is left with the manuscript and money to secure some sort of publication. In the final words of her work, Frannie thinks of Sal.

I imagine Sal one day, watching some dusky little mulatta girl hanging off her mother's hand. She smiles, as she does every time she sees a mongre who reminds her of me. 'Look'pon dat, Fran, look'pon dat. We still here! We fruitful! We multiplying!' She laughs her big, wide-open mouth. But these pages are for you.
(370)

While the "you" in this passage refers to Frannie's defense lawyer, it arguably extends to any of those who would read and believe Frannie's narrative and *defend* her. It extends to Sal and the

“little mulatta girl” who may someday read Frannie’s narrative which she deems “an account of myself and my own life and the happiness that came to it, which was not a thing I thought I’d ever be allowed, the happiness *or* the account” (8). Through the creation of her narrative, her nurturing of her own story and those in her life that in turn nurtured her, Frannie gives birth to her own narrative, one that allows her a futurity, the same futurity promised in the “re-” of reproduction, and creates a space for her narrative to live on after her death.

The fight for black motherhood is far from over. Though Frannie’s text is situated in the 19th century, the text itself was written and published in the 21st century. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Black women are three times more likely to die from pregnancy related causes than White women” (CDC). Another study conducted by Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), found that between the years of 2007 and 2016, 40.8% of pregnancy-related deaths were Black women (compare this to only 12.7% as White women). Along with this, the mortality rate for Black infants during the same period was 10.8% compared to the 4.6% recorded for White infants. According to KFF, nearly all pregnancy-related deaths are preventable, with cardiovascular conditions being the leading cause of these deaths. Racist ideologies associated with the Black body’s ability to regulate pain manifest in the medical field through biased care where simple regulation of blood pressure and heart-rate are denied to certain patients even when in obvious distress. Black women are more likely to die of hemorrhage and/or high blood pressure during pregnancy, both of which could be prevented through careful monitoring. According to the same study, “black adults were more likely than White adults to report feeling a provider didn’t believe they were telling the truth and being refused a test, treatment, or pain medication they thought they needed” (KFF). The policing of Black maternity did not end with the abolishment of slavery. Instead, it persists through the same

racialized and biased conceptions of the Black female's ability to be a mother present in the 19th century.

Frannie's narrative is not about fertility or the policing of fertility by European politics and economics, but instead a reclaiming of a cultural motherhood often denied to enslaved females. Whether biologically mothers or simply part of a larger community, the enslaved African female *was* involved in the process of raising children on Caribbean plantations. Frannie's narrative pushes against notions of the enslaved mother as "unmothering" and instead demonstrates the way in which the focus on gynopolitics – fertility for political gain – overshadowed the indispensable role of the black enslaved mother. Frannie's narrative creates a space for reclamation of these "uninhabited" spaces of enslaved motherhood as potential spaces of resistance for enslaved women. Through the gynopolitical archive concerned only with fertility and reproductivity, Frannie is seen only as the product of Langton. She asks herself after discovering she is Langton's child, "What does that make me? A patchwork monster. A thing sewn from Langton's parts" (141). She is the white man's experiment turned monster, "Langton's monster," a killer. Yet, when read as resisting gynopolitics and promoting a cultural motherhood, Frannie is not a monster, but a mother. By writing her own narrative, constructing it piece by piece, Frannie gives birth to something new: "My account of myself" (369). She gives birth to the idea that she can be reanimated, brought to life in a new way through telling her own story even after death. Frannie is a patchwork, it is true, but not of her white enslaver. Frannie is a patchwork of cultural motherhood. Her story, and her interactions with Miss-Bella, Phibbah, and Madame, demonstrate the way in which cultural perceptions of motherhood created and shaped a culture *apart* from the dominant, white narrative of gynopolitics. Frannie, the Jamaican turned European, the educated black, the secret lover, the published writer, dies, like Phibbah, in

order to protect her narrative, creating a space where her story and others like it have a place and the means to live.

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