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by

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Milk Matters:
Contemporary Representations of Breast-giving, Property, and the Self

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Milk Matters:
Contemporary Representations of Breast-giving, Property, and the Self

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Milk Matters:
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This dissertation insists that by studying literary scenes of breastfeeding we can learn about women's relationships with property and potential for self-determination. The argument uses six texts ranging from antebellum slave narratives, which contest the right of women to nurse their own children, to recent fiction from India that simultaneously venerates maternity while regulating its physical attributes through oppressive laws of caste and marriage. These texts portray breastmilk as property that can be stolen, sold, or otherwise manipulated, as are the lactating characters that must claim their milk or have it used against them. Rather than depicting apolitical maternal bonds, these portrayals emphasize the economic and material elements of breastfeeding by certain women—wives, slaves, servants, and outcastes—who challenge their subjugated status and assert their agency by “breast-giving,” my term for nursing to achieve personal or

political efficacy. This activity, I argue, is akin to “stealing oneself,” slave vernacular for escape, which underscores the significance of so-called property determining its employment by controlling what its body produces. My analyses illuminate both the hierarchies that distinguish persons from property in these texts and the exigency of women’s subversive declarations of self within them.

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Introduction
Servants, Slaves, Wet-nurses, Wives, Middle-class and “Professional” Mothers

In July 2004, Silver Spring, Maryland Starbucks customer Lorig Charkoudian was asked by an employee to “cover [her] baby's head with a towel” while nursing, “or go into the rest room” to do so. The employee made the request presumably to prevent offending the one other customer present, toward whom Charkoudian’s back was turned, and who hadn’t complained. Rather than preventing a confrontation, the incident instead sparked a one-hundred-person protest outside the business and a thirty-woman nurse-in at the store.¹ The Washington Post and Associated Press picked up the story and forced recognition of breastfeeding’s potential controversy. Charkoudian insisted that the ubiquitous Starbucks company “adopt a nationwide policy” allowing breastfeeding women to nurse undisturbed in compliance with over thirty states’ laws that protect the act, which further ushered this agenda onto the mainstream media stage.² Breastfeeding rights continue to make headline news as illustrated by the public reaction to the discomfort voiced by TV interviewer Barbara Walters in June 2005 over seeing a woman breastfeeding near her on a commercial flight. Walters’ comments sparked over two hundred breastfeeding mothers to demonstrate outside ABC headquarters with their

¹ Bhatia, Juhie. “Moms Fight to Breastfeed in Public.” *Womensenews* 22 November 2004.

² Senate bill #3999-A entitled “An Act to amend the civil rights law in relation to granting mothers an absolute right to breast feed” became New York State law in 1994. “Maryland's legislation, enacted in 2003, provides that a mother may breastfeed her child in any public or private place where they are authorized to be, without any restrictions or limitations on this right,” while New York and California allow women to sue for civil rights violation if they are prevented from breastfeeding in public (Bhatia, cited above).

nursing babies in tow as well as a flurry of discussion and protest in Internet chat rooms across the world.³

This flood of “lactivism” brings public awareness to what nursing women have long known: breastfeeding involves not only the private transmission of milk from mother to child but may have broader and more urgent political implications as well. Despite its typically prosaic representation as a natural if not benign activity, breastfeeding can reflect profound issues of female agency and human rights violations, issues more grave than the prohibition against nursing in public while sipping an iced latte. In recent years, for example, high quantities of manmade toxins such as pesticides and PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) have been discovered in the breastmilk of women living in highly agricultural or arctic regions of the world; these concentrated contaminants have been linked to increased developmental impairments in nursing children.⁴ Treaties aimed at decreasing these amounts are underway, yet the health of women living in these regions continues to be affected. Concurrently, throughout the world including the West, discussions about HIV/AIDS infected mothers and the potential harm or benefits of their breastmilk have replaced debates on breast- vs. bottle-feeding, such as the infamous formula campaigns and Nestlé boycotts of the 1960s, 70s

³ Harmon, Amy. “‘Lactivists’ Taking Their Cause, and Their Babies, to the Streets.” *New York Times on the Web* 7 June 2005.

⁴ Researchers Philip J. Landrigan, et al. have found that “Some of the highest levels of contaminants are seen among women in agricultural areas of the developing world that are extensively treated with pesticides...and among women in remote areas, such as the Canadian Inuit, who eat a diet rich in seal, whale, and other species high on the marine food chain that accumulate heavy burdens of persistent organic pollutants.”

and 80s.⁵ Although nurse-in demonstrations challenge normative conceptions of how mothers are meant to behave by linking their reproductive capability with visible political presence, in its hurry to secure public acceptability of breastfeeding such lactivism overlooks fundamental issues of privilege and responsibility, which may obscure more profound questions of breastfeeding's significance to female autonomy and the self.

These present-day examples of "lactivism" are not the first occasions in which women's breasts have been used politically. At a speaking engagement in the mid nineteenth century, Sojourner Truth famously responded to a hostile audience's demand that she prove her gender by baring her breasts. In "Runaway Tongues," Harryette Mullen contends that this "unabashed" display of Truth's "materiality," which shamed her hecklers rather than keeping her from speaking as intended, exemplifies her liberation from "slavery as well as the need to embody the dominant cultural aesthetic of feminine purity" (256). By claiming the space to express herself before an antagonistic group largely composed of white men, Truth resisted the dual forces of sexual and racial exploitation meant to silence her and "memorialized [herself] as a body with a voice" (Mullen 267).

Truth's bold performance highlights a fact that the recent and increasing activism surrounding breastfeeding legislation often overlooks: the female body is not always protected by the luxuries of identity that make such publicly resistant behavior as

⁵ For more on the competing economic and physiological values of breastfeeding and associated human rights violations see Naomi Baumslag and Dia L. Michels' *Milk, Money and Madness: The Culture and Politics of Breastfeeding*. Bernice Hausman's excellent study *Mother's Milk: Breastfeeding Controversies in Contemporary America* provides a medical perspective on these debates and comments on their international valence.

lactivism possible; Truth, I argue, ironically underscores the vulnerability of enslaved or Black female bodies through her brave response. Women's reproductive abilities are hardly ever in fact divorced from economic, cultural and other social valences that may be used to commodify or exploit them. The international archive of literature I consider in the following chapters supports this fact by depicting breastfeeding as deeply bound to material concerns of subjectivity, rights and autonomy as well as subsistence. My analyses of these texts attempt to expose pragmatic features of strategic breastfeeding that underscore its materiality and distinguish the activity from sentimental representations that have previously shaped its image.

Like the white women in Sojourner Truth's audience whom Lydia Maria Child described as "abashed" by her display, I suspect many readers may be unprepared to view or accept the revelation of these images and my interpretations of them, which call into question romanticized notions of breastfeeding as well as accepted modes of property ownership and male-controlled power. Indeed, much of the previous criticism on these texts fails to engage with the reality of material exploitation of the female body but rather attributes their violent or subversive incidents to psychological neurosis or other dysfunctional causes. These interpretations result, I contend, in a second violation of the lactating characters and their experiences. My intervention into this criticism highlights these oversights or willful misreadings of resistant breastfeeding behavior, which can encourage hesitant readers to address what they aren't used to seeing and to discuss what these omissions might suggest.

This project's archive comes from a developing body of literature that depicts breastmilk as a commodity that can be stolen, sold, manipulated, or exchanged. These depictions, and my analyses of them, challenge a key assumption about breastfeeding, namely, that it is an apolitical activity exclusively experienced between mother and child. I insist, rather, that breastfeeding can be a substantial means of achieving both personal and political efficacy. To this end, I apply the premise that "'property-in-person' is the first modality of the subject" to six American and South Asian works of fiction that feature variously subjugated breastfeeding characters.⁶ My readings prove that these women negotiate their conditions using the "property" located in their bodies, thereby asserting their subject status.

"Breast-giving," my term for the deliberate use of one's milk, happens in these texts between wives and husbands, slaves and their owners, and across caste. Even when occurring between mothers and their biological children it is critiqued for continuing "too long." The reverse, "breast-taking," is also employed as a means of preventing self-ownership. I read the reclamation of breastmilk by subjugated female characters as similar to the oddly transitive slave expression for escape, to "steal oneself." My assertion illuminates distinctions between persons and property that both enable and provoke subversive breastfeeding, emphasizing this activity's significance to women's declarations of self.

⁶ Samira Kawash develops this concept, borrowed from Locke and Hegel, in her article "Fugitive Properties." She argues that the discrete nature of property and person demanded by American slavery initiates the figure of the fugitive who fully inhabits neither category.

While the dissertation is primarily a literary and cultural study, which relies on specific contexts of breast-giving to explain fictional strategies of self-declaration, it has currency with 21st-century U.S. examples of lactivism as well, and can inform that movement's agenda. By bringing attention to the trials experienced by breastfeeding women, lactivism embodies the hallmark claim of second-wave feminism that the personal is political; however, it underscores the privilege that allows some women to agitate for their right to breastfeed in public (or to request that others around them don't), which is not shared by the majority of women in this country, let alone in the world. For those without this privilege, the necessity of working outside the home may supersede dilemmas about where they might be allowed to nurse their children. Others may associate breastfeeding with perceptions of racially "suspect" bodies that prevent them from ever performing this activity. This latter concern highlights a distinction between U.S. women of color and their white counterparts' decisions about infant feeding.

In *At the Breast: Ideologies of Breastfeeding and Motherhood in the Contemporary United States* (1999), Linda Blum argues that race and economic status are key features in determining whether women will or will not breastfeed, either in public or at home. Her interviews with working-class mothers in south-eastern Michigan reveal a widespread perception of breastfeeding as a form of attachment parenting that would restrict the mothers' need to "go...back to work," an untenable situation for most working-class professionals (Blum 164). While also concerned about missing work, the most pervasive inhibitor of breastfeeding offered by the twenty-six African American women in the group Blum interviewed stemmed from notions of the self in relation to the

community; they gave reasons specifically tied to how other people perceived them. Blum found that “nearly all [of these women] touched on the public/private divide, the need for vigilance in keeping their suspect bodies private”; breastfeeding, they felt, “severely...violates that privacy” (165).⁷ This perception of the black female body as suspicious stems from oppressive stereotypes initiated during slavery: what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the “controlling images” of the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother and the prostitute, which continue to persist in the U.S. (Collins 67).⁸

These women’s concerns with keeping their bodies protected from public scrutiny contrasts with the sense of entitlement that allows other women to turn a potentially private incident like Charkoudian’s into a forum for public protest. This discrepancy in maternal rights, including the right to determine how one’s body is viewed (as suspect or entitled), gives rise to the central questions of this dissertation: How does identity—chiefly that defined by economic status and relationships with property—affect women’s breastfeeding behavior? Likewise, what can breastfeeding, particularly in the face of disempowering challenges, reveal about female agency?

⁷ In *Mother’s Milk*, Bernice Hausman offers an alternative interpretation for these mothers’ decision. She contends that “low rates of breastfeeding in the African-American community” might be attributed to the negligent health care of this group and a lack of medical encouragement surrounding the activity (221).

⁸ Edith Frampton suggests that “For Collins, one way of subverting these hegemonic ‘controlling images’ is by creating and inhabiting new identity categories available through motherhood,” which may lead to African-American women’s problematic renunciation of breastfeeding (144).

Gendered Economies and the Self

The feminist concept of “caring labor” and culturally specific descriptions of “motherwork” offer useful explanations of what motivates maternal characters to provide for their children against the grain of self-interested male or dominant Western economics.⁹ In her groundbreaking article, “‘Holding Hands at Midnight’: The Paradox of Caring Labor,” Nancy Folbre writes about the distinctions between care-motivated labor and self-serving work as imagined in neoclassical economic theory. She explains the foundational tenet of neoclassical theory that “rational economic man maximizes a utility function that does not include any consideration of other people’s welfare, *especially those outside his immediate family*” (74, my emphasis). The italicized clause points to interesting commonalities between the paternalist desire to serve one’s own needs by providing for one’s family legacy and an ethic of care practiced by the maternal characters in the literary examples in my archive.

We must also consider culturally specific conceptions of the self and other as these are essential to attentive readings of care giving. What may seem, for example, from a white Western feminist perspective to be a negation of the self by oppressive expectations of mothering, Black feminist theory might interpret as empowering. In her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (2004), Andrea O’Reilly quotes Patricia Hill Collins on the differences between Afro- and Euro-centric ideologies

⁹ For more on the prevalent gender divide in Western cultures and its connection with economic power see Gayle Rubin’s foundational essay, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in Reyna Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, esp. p. 168; see also Jane Fishburne Collier and Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, “Marriage, Motherhood and Direct Exchange: Expression of Male Dominance in ‘Egalitarian’ Societies.”

of mothering. Collins states, “the assumption that motherhood and economic dependency on men are linked and that to be a ‘good’ mother one must stay at home, making motherhood a full-time ‘occupation,’ is ... uncharacteristic of African-American families” (qtd. in O’Reilly 9). O’Reilly posits that the public/private divide characteristic of Eurocentric feminist theory may be irrelevant to Black mothers, whose actions in the home have political value. Rather than viewing mothering as necessarily distinct from public economic life, bell hooks likewise describes the political and historic significance of what occurs in an African-American “homeplace.” She writes:

Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where one could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied to us on the outside in the public world. (42)¹⁰

The discursive space that hooks describes serves as a domestic site of restoration for inhabitants who are embattled outside its borders. The powerful sources of this restoration are “black women,” mothers who resist external oppressions in their own domain. This passage suggests that cultural specificity significantly affects the way maternal or caring labor might be defined.

¹⁰ Notably, hooks’ concept of “homeplace” does not ensure the protection needed by the Black mothers of Blum’s study to feel confident about breastfeeding there. Women and men of the Black community have internalized some of the dehumanizing oppression that leads to this activity’s “bestial” or sexualized associations outside of the home. Likewise, intraracial gender politics persist as an impediment to fully realized Black female emancipation. On this point, see Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s *Gender Talk*.

Nancy Folbre nonetheless compellingly links the ubiquity of economic meaning to the perpetuation of life, which might suggest a collapse of boundaries between domestic and public spheres;¹¹ she maintains, “virtually all economic activities are rooted in the provisioning of human existence” (74). Akin to self-interested neoclassical theory in this way, Folbre’s argument differs in its focus on a feminist understanding of work driven by “a caring motive: *labor undertaken out of affection or a sense of responsibility for other people, with no expectation of immediate pecuniary reward*” (74-75, original emphasis). One goal of this dissertation is to demonstrate how this motive undermines neoclassical or paternalist standards of value, leading to the persecution of characters who engage in caring labor. However, neither Folbre’s emphasis on affective motivation, nor my use of her theory to describe maternal behavior is meant to suggest that breast-giving characters are disinterested in traditional remuneration. Rather, I argue that the acts in which they engage—chiefly, using their breastmilk as they choose—challenge expectations of mothers’ self-sacrifice or martyrdom, which ignore the economic implications of maternal experience.

Indeed, I argue that by claiming their milk, these characters resist both sentimental precedent and paternalist economics, which suggest that mothering is its own reward and that mothers don’t need reciprocation; this precedent is especially harmful when the recipient is not a biological relation of the mother, as in the naturalized sacrifices of the “mammy” whose own children may die for lack of her milk, or the professional Brahmin wet-nurse who acts and is viewed like a goddess but who

¹¹ For more on the feminist argument contesting separate sphere theory, see Davidson.

nevertheless requires mundane healthcare to preserve her life. In addition to acknowledging their labor as work, the insistence of subjugated characters on acting as mothers by breastfeeding when denied this privilege by their relationship to property—such as enslaved mothers who lack the right to claim ownership of their children or outcaste women prohibited from nursing upper-class children—constitutes a distinctive, non-monetary resistance that yet remains economic in its reclamation of property *by* so-called property; I call this type of resistance breast-giving.

When employed by subjugated women breast-giving can be viewed as a threat to traditional power structures and as such must be suppressed. I argue throughout the dissertation that this perceived threat can lead to the use of their lactation against female characters to reify the boundaries of their subject positions, leading to acts of breast-taking. In the most infamous scene in *Beloved*, for instance, which I write about in chapter three, the nephews of Sethe's overseer hold her down and milk her. The brutality of this gesture underscores the status of the enslaved lactating woman within plantation life: like that of a domesticated farm animal, her body and the milk it contains is accessible to her master's will. A slave's breastmilk is yet another commodity, like her body and her children, over whose fates she is accorded no control.

The slaveholding protagonist of Valerie Martin's novel *Property*, the subject of chapter one, makes similar claims on her servant Sarah's nursing body; she takes milk from her breast in order to prove her right of possession over her and to challenge her husband's unmitigated power as master of his plantation, which includes her slaves. *Property* provokes comparisons between the roles of wife and female slave and the

access to each that dominant male heads of households enjoy. In chapter two I explore this analogous feature in the response of an otherwise subservient Hindu woman to her husband's presumptuous appropriation of her breastmilk. By bathing his face with her milk she redirects his desire, thereby avoiding painful intercourse. I argue that the wife's subversive determination of her sexual fate allows her to (temporarily) obtain the elusive autonomy otherwise withheld from her by marriage.

Breastfeeding's role in economic power relations has not been previously studied. Research on wet-nursing, however, articulates the exchange of some women's work, such as childcare, for other women's freedom, a topic of feminist inquiry initiated in the 1960s. Such research highlights the direct exchange of infants between the nurse and the family who employs her; I likewise acknowledge these exchanges in chapters one, three, and four, which look at the ways in which breastfeeding contributes to non-reciprocal gendered labor. Wet-nurses were not usually allowed to keep their own children with them for fear of lessening their purchased milk supply. Consequently, their children, who couldn't be sent to nurses of their own, often perished for lack of access to their working mothers' milk. This literal exchange notwithstanding, even wet-nurses who continue to suckle their biological offspring (as does the protagonist of Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver," which I analyze in chapter four) suffer the consequences of "professional motherhood" and this labor's demands on their personal health.

The costs of professional breastfeeding underscore the connection between human rights and the arbitrary categories of gender, race, caste and class that designate some people as property and others as property owners. These designations, I argue, lead

women to reclaim the property their bodies produce once their right to do so has been stolen. Paid wet-nurses differ in this way from most of my examples of breast-givers because they typically retained ownership of their milk until exchanging it in sale. If their ownership of this intrinsic “property” did not ensure the survival of their own children, it nevertheless provided the ability to negotiate, which, as my dissertation will demonstrate, is an important element of subject status.

The precedent set by formal wet-nursing suggests the importance of examining breastfeeding as unpaid labor. Studies of enslaved black “mammies” belie the expectation that wet-nursing one’s future owner might ensure his eventual reciprocal benevolence. Instead, the dependency developed between the children of slaveholders and their wet-nurses reproduces itself given the potential to own human chattel; the milk to which the white child is entitled in infancy, and for which the mammy or wet-nurse’s biological children may have to wait, falls into the category of the slaveholder’s property. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese documents a rare example of a white mistress nursing her black slaves to ensure the longevity of her family’s human possessions.¹² This example highlights the economic significance of breastfeeding in property relationships and suggests that financial investment may occasionally trump squeamish perceptions of contamination and character development. The political implications of these cross-racial nursing relationships are echoed in contemporary instances that may include aspects of formal servitude.

¹² Cited in Golden, p. 73.

Property-in-Person

The historical legacy of slavery, which gave whites sole power over the use of the bodies they purchased as property, affects the existing desire of African American women to protect their physical privacy. It is well established that slavery's formal commodification of people extended to anything slaves produced—including their breastmilk and children, which created a strange economy.¹³ Although their awareness of this economy did not enable enslaved women to overthrow or wholly dismantle their owners' power, the reproductive value of their bodies allowed them to sometimes manipulate what Darlene Hine and Kate Wittenstein term “the sexual and economic nexus inherent in [their] dual role in the slave system” (297). These manipulations, which included “sexual abstinence, abortion, and infanticide,” have been studied by others who are, like me, invested in discovering unconventional means of establishing subject status in abject circumstances. My interrogation of breast-giving enters this critical discourse and seeks to expand its parameters to recognize the significance of so-called property claiming what its body produces as its own possession. Such a claim radically challenges the tenet that one cannot simultaneously own and be property.

At the base of my study is the assumption of breastmilk's symbolic power, made mystical or conversely over-naturalized by sentimental perceptions of maternity. Due to these perceptions, therefore, its use as a token of exchange or as a commodity seems unusual or even base. The normative logic is that something so crucial to the mother and child bond should be viewed as precious and thus protected from economic villainy—it

¹³ For more on the uncanny effects of human commodification and antebellum property laws, see Walter Johnson's *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*.

should not be sold, traded, or paid for. (Similar logic ensures that contemporary breastmilk banks collect only donations of mother's milk rather than paying for it like other human substances such as blood or semen.)¹⁴ This idealized perception of breastfeeding, however, does not reflect the experience of maternity for most enslaved women, nor those employed outside the institution of slavery as wet-nurses. My archive instead shows a broad range of women whose breast-giving cannot be called professional are still affected by struggles for ownership, power, and self-determination. Thus I argue for the importance of demystifying breastfeeding in alternative, non-professional circumstances as well.

There has been a proliferation of scholarship on wet-nursing in the last twenty-five years ranging from George Sussman's fascinating book about the apex of this industry in seventeenth-century France, *Selling Mothers' Milk: The Wet-Nursing Business in France 1715-1914* (1982) to a recent study conducted by Hill, Johnston, Campbell, and Birdsell urging the "medical and demographic importance" of present-day wet-nursing.¹⁵ This scholarship provides historical models for wet-nursing and illustrates the economic dependency and class dynamics of women employed in this field. This dissertation does not seek to replicate these examinations, nor does it focus primarily on

¹⁴ There are only six milk banks currently functioning in the U.S., most of which are in relatively solvent communities with large academic populations, e.g., Austin, Raleigh, Denver, San Jose, Iowa City, and Newark, DE. Commercial blood and semen banks, on the other hand, which are too numerous to list, tend to operate in lower income, urban centers and advertise cash compensation.

¹⁵ Hill, Gerry, et al. "The Medical and Demographic Importance of Wet-Nursing." In addition, see Valerie Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present*; Janet Golden, *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle*; and Mary E. Tagge, "Wet Nursing 2001: Old Practice, New Dilemmas?"

breast-giving for money, though professional wet-nursing occurs in some of the texts under consideration. Inspired by the duality of sexual and economic roles antebellum enslaved women were forced to inhabit this dissertation examines their corollary among twentieth-century married, purchased, and otherwise subjugated African American and Indian women: servants, slaves, wet-nurses, wives, middle-class and “professional” mothers in various historical moments and cultural contexts. The goal of my analyses is to determine the function and power of breastfeeding within a range of male dominated economic societies. Although these societies maintain the discrepancy of privilege between women described above as entitled or suspect, they also typically relegate all women to positions subordinate to those held by men of property and underscore the connection between economic autonomy and agency.¹⁶

Positioning my interest within a larger conversation about selfhood, gender, and ownership, I analyze fictional accounts of female characters resisting the undesirable or dehumanizing use of their bodies and what they produce, and connect their ability to do so with their relationships to property. The characters’ status as either property owners or property themselves reflects my premise that economic power or the threat of its loss (autonomy versus dependence) leads to a variety of nursing behaviors. While not entirely successful in dismantling oppressive hierarchies, these reclamations challenge dominant norms and belie conventional representations of breastfeeding as a benign and private activity, showing that *breast-giving* can have notable power and political significance.

¹⁶ I am mindful here of not overlooking the critical economic divisions between poor men and wealthy women relevant to many of the societies examined in the dissertation’s primary literature.

Instead of being solely a functional means of physically sustaining children, breastmilk may be used as a tool of manipulation by both lactating female characters and those around them. As the following chapters will demonstrate, this shift in perception from the sentimental model of breastfeeding as nurturing maternal care to a pragmatic means of asserting power or claiming autonomy frequently finds resistance both within the texts and among their critics.¹⁷ The dissertation therefore has an additional epistemic goal of demonstrating new readings of the literature—which ranges from relatively obscure to canonically familiar—that includes a view of breast-giving in all its complexities, even and especially those outside the accepted norm.

A Literary Archive and the Politics of Maternalism

Maternal characters in fiction typically perform conventional rather than rebellious behavior. Depictions of transgressive mothers, particularly breastfeeding ones, are rare; those who appear to oppose the association of maternity with nurturing or the reproduction of culture come across as evil aberrations of their gender. Even as exemplary failures they help uphold the standards of maternity by warning against defying societal norms. These fictional examples have political relevance as well. The nineteenth-century Western cult of womanhood led to a “politics of maternalism” that

¹⁷ Much of the critical work done of these texts tends to emphasize the affective or sentimental aspects of mothering and ignore potential economic analysis, even in cases where such readings seem obvious, as in Valerie Martin’s novel *Property*, where the title directs us to its theme. Mahasweta Devi’s “Breast-Giver” is a noted exception that generated Gayatri Spivak’s critical essay, which takes issue with the materialist interpretation of the story that Devi herself gives. I address the schism in scholarship on that text in the final chapter.

emphasized the nationalist duty of mothers to cultivate new subjects for their country.¹⁸ Mothers could patriotically contribute to the nation's successful future by reproducing the next generation. This legacy continues with contemporary cultural demands on women to produce morally balanced, productive citizens—a weighty challenge waged often at the mother's personal expense. Transgressive mothers in this schema are tantamount to bad mothers; they are the ones who selfishly consider their needs before their children's or who produce "bad seeds."

Fictional representations of mothers highlight these stakes by reducing maternal figures to stereotypes of the self-sacrificing ideal, using the nurturing precedent of breastfeeding as a trope of "true" maternity coded as womanhood or femininity. The ambitious Lady Macbeth, for example, asserts her fortitude and rebukes her gender by refusing to "give suck" to a hypothetical hungry child. Shakespeare underscores Lady Macbeth's repudiation of the "natural" or "womanly" behavior of gentle, munificent mothers by adding the violent image of dashing the child's head against a wall. In stark contrast is Steinbeck's representation of the tragically maternal, Oakie martyr, Rose of

¹⁸ In the public sphere, anxiety about "race betterment" and mass immigration in the U.S. prompted associations between motherhood and nation building, creating a politics of maternalism. See Blum p. 22-23. This project was not limited to the U.S. but was powerfully employed in anti-colonial struggles in India as well. See Sumathi Ramaswamy's *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970* and Peter van der Veer's *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. I address the related nationalist rhetoric of maternity that persists in post-Independence India in greater detail in chapter four.

Sharon Joad who, prompted by her mother, unselfishly offers her milk-filled breast to a starving stranger, concluding *Grapes of Wrath* in bovine repose.¹⁹

Although these characterizations do not reflect the entirety of fictional breastfeeding models, they are two of the better known that reinforce common stereotypes. Both of these examples, either by embodying the ideal or its opposite, construct an unattainable model of self-sacrificing nurturing maternity. Within the very limited range from martyr mother to selfish matriarch represented by these texts are women who breastfeed against popular norms, by nursing “too long” or acknowledging the sensual elements of doing so. Women who oppose societal norms breastfeed without enjoying the benefits of this supposedly celebrated and ostensibly protected act. Their transgressions are morally judged, and, in extreme cases, considered criminal, occasionally leading to loss of child custody.²⁰

The following chapters will show that women who breastfeed to assert their right of access to their children or out of a desire to retain or achieve autonomy are even more vulnerable than those just described. Fictional examples of these less commonly depicted

¹⁹ In Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* the “mysterious smile” Rose of Sharon gives while nursing the starving man problematically implies that her selfless willingness to give suck while she herself is sick and hungry provides her *raison d’être*, p. 405-06. The sacrificial Christ motif of this image conjures other examples of religiously inflected breastfeeding beneficence. I have been alerted to medieval representations of a lactating Jesus that call up fascinating possibilities for future study of gender, religion and breastfeeding. Gandhi, too, intriguingly posits himself as India’s “mother” in his own writing.

²⁰ In *Milk, Money, and Madness*, Baumslag and Michels examine a series of court cases in which American women are variously charged with neglect for failing to wean (as in the 1991 Syracuse, NY case involving a two-year who was ultimately sent to foster care) and indecent exposure for breastfeeding in public to demonstrate how misinterpretation of what are culturally determined practices may be used to punish women. See especially Section One: “Breastfeeding Beliefs and Practices.”

mothers, who challenge their status or identity restrictions by using this unique means of their maternity offer unrealized potential for the study of female agency and resourcefulness. In highlighting these models rather than those that reiterate sentimental maternal norms, the dissertation makes a cultural intervention and introduces a new paradigm for scholarly inquiry. This paradigm, moreover, is not limited by discipline but is ripe for analysis by diverse methodologies.

The decision to use works of fiction as my primary case studies of breast-giving was neither an exclusive nor obvious choice, though it has resulted in compelling discoveries; theoretically, similar arguments could be made using historical accounts or anthropological ethnographies. Unfortunately, such studies of breastfeeding, particularly during the moments and locations represented by the literature in my archive, are limited at best, frustrating others before me who have tried to assemble their piecemeal archives (see Golden 1996). Fortunately, deliberate research can yield numerous, if relatively unknown, literary examples of breast-giving against the grain. However, their interpretation as economically or politically salient to constructions of the female self and relationships to property are nonexistent. Reflecting the paucity of nonfiction material about these experiences, several of the texts I've selected attempt to fill gaps in our historical knowledge about breast-giving women struggling to assert minimal agency, if not to gain considerable power within cultural contexts that resist their efforts.

In chapter three "Fugitives Unbound: Breast-giving as Self-Declaration," for example, I look at "Eve's Sin," Wajeda Tabassum's story of a young, outcaste Urdu woman who embodies a rarely recorded experience of dispossession. A wealthy, more

powerful female character narrates the events, filtering them through her own class-induced bias rather than allowing the outcaste woman to speak for herself. Because the story highlights the relative privilege of its female characters, its narrative conservatism seems imperative to the story's depiction of breastfeeding resistance and its limitations. Similarly, in chapter one, which addresses a fictional account of American enslavement, the slaveholding narrator provides the novel's sole perspective. In this case the enslaved character's point of view could, in fact, be reconstructed from historical records, thus her silence appears significant vis-à-vis her breast-giving as an alternative means of communicating agency. These fictional (re)creations of human experience allow for such strategic pairings and subsequent insight into the ordeals faced by the breast-giving characters.

I refer to these texts as case studies; more precisely they are problem cases that yield new discoveries about power, property, and the embodied self. Furthermore, the term "case studies" acknowledges what I believe are the joint benefits of the literary medium for my research. In addition to recreating real women's experiences to augment what may be absent from historical archives, I contend that fiction offers unique possibilities for imaginative rebellion or resistance and offers the opportunity to study these alternative means of insurgence. In their commentary on historical or culturally specific struggles for power, moreover, the fiction illustrates the material realities characters negotiate through breast-giving, thereby expanding both our range of expectation about this romanticized activity and the contexts in which it occurs.

A Note on Culture

Taking into account the extensive work that has already been done on the status of women as property within the context of American slavery, one might ask where this project intervenes. In particular I bring a perspective informed by postcolonial literary theory to bear on the issue of enslaved women's subjectivity. I argue that pairing historical accounts of human bondage in America's antebellum South yields relevant insight into contemporary incidents of de facto slavery experienced by women in both the U.S. and in India where women and children are still purchased to perform debasing labor and sexual servitude; in the following chapters I read analogous examples of informal enslavement in cases of marriage as well. The ongoing relevance of potential enslavement, if not a general interest in studying the lactating self, therefore justifies continued scholarship of women in these circumstances. The texts' common centrality of breast-giving as a narrative device leads to their conceptual similarities. Milk and its transmission create otherwise unrealized movement or circuits between the characters, which provide intriguing material for reconceiving the self. Given the ostensibly disparate origins of the literature and their authors' various perspectives on subjectivity, mothering, and breastmilk, it is important to acknowledge what else joins these particular cultural contexts.

The dissertation develops out of the American slave tradition with two contemporary novels that revisit antebellum history to make the pathology of that system explicit. Toni Morrison and Valerie Martin more recently portray fictional circumstances based on historical accounts of the social ills endemic to slavery. By highlighting the

exploitation of female bodies, their novels emphasize the role of gender in this pathology and the abject status of enslaved females as its most vulnerable victims. They also importantly explore subversive outlets for retaliation, upon which the dissertation expands. Morrison and Martin foreground extreme examples of racist and sexist manipulations enacted by slaveholders; by doing so in the twentieth century they comment not only upon the past but also on its persistent legacy. Although their revisionist fictions document abuses that likely occurred, they shock contemporary audiences who may be unaware of such atrocities and who question whether comparable exploitation of Black women continues in the present. These representations bring attention to issues that continue to affect this community; the rationale outlined above regarding the resistance of contemporary African American women to nurse in front of others underscores this point.

The examples of breast-taking that Martin and Morrison respectively describe in *Property* and *Beloved* seem additionally relevant to a contemporary cultural study of India. In chapter three I read *Beloved* alongside Wajeda Tabassum's Urdu short story "Eve's Sin" about an outcaste woman who is purchased to perform menial labor but instead breastfeeds an upper-class child to the horror of her owners and their community. I contextualize this character's predicament by describing the perceived sexual availability of outcaste or "untouchable" women, which condemns them to abuse like that experienced by enslaved African Americans. To do so I mention a current saying in the Indian region of Uttar Pradesh documented by anthropologist Leela Dube that an untouchable woman, like a she-goat, may be milked at any time. This culturally

sanctioned endorsement of certain women's physical violation equates outcasts with animals, imitating the logic used to dehumanize and mistreat Black slaves. Moreover, the saying reveals a disturbing common view within these cultures of the breast as an accessible site of abuse, which points to the significance of assessing the self via scenes of breast-giving within this framework.

The concentration of my graduate study, formally titled "Ethnic and Third World Literature," further supports such a comparison of cultures. Rather than isolating these areas as other programs do, mine encourages dialogue between postcolonial and so-called ethnic literary theory, which illuminates their common underpinnings. My project groups together what I've called problem cases, creating a corpus of literary examples of the lactating body that refuses to acquiesce to its oppression. The resistance theory that informs my reading comes from a variety of sources, including feminist arguments on embodiment, postcolonial studies of mimicry, and African American concepts of double-consciousness and subversion. Read separately, each of these models would yield a distinct interpretation of the following texts; combined, they allow me to situate the characters in a more comprehensive composite narrative, which aims to instruct readers coming from multiple disciplinary backgrounds and various interests in forms of transgression that speak beyond the fiction.

The dissertation in this way develops the discourse initiated by joint study of postcolonial and ethnic literature and parallels the critical revisionist work that the fiction authors do. Some of these authors have been more overt about the desired political repercussions of publishing their stories. Toni Morrison, for instance, has extensively

addressed the recuperative agenda of *Beloved* to remand its readers to the horrors of the Middle Passage and its continuing impact on the symbolic descendents of the “sixty million or more” lost in it. American audiences are still receptive of the “rememory” (Morrison’s term) process necessary to rebuilding this disassociative past, evidenced by the recent popularity of Martin’s novel *Property*. Of the South Asian authors, Mahasweta Devi writes and speaks publicly in her native Bengali about rights for tribal and outcaste *dalit* peoples, acknowledging the double vulnerability and power of women in this system (see her full collection *Breast-Stories* from which “Breast-Giver” comes). Tabassum does the same, writing exclusively in Urdu and crediting her Muslim faith as the source of her inspiration for urging women’s rights and equality. The translation of their stories into English broadens their audience, as does their inclusion in the present intercultural assembly of texts. What may seem at first to be anachronistic history ultimately establishes itself as eerily cohesive once the lactating characters are read in conversation.

The African American connection with the South Asian cultural context benefits particularly well from the comparative readings I perform in chapters two and three, in which I pair two novels by Morrison with short stories by the diasporic Gujarati writer, Ginu Kamani and Tabassum. These pairings are intended to illuminate each other, both within and across chapters, and succeed, I believe, due to their sometimes-startling common themes. The breast-givers of this fiction are motivated by their physical needs: to express the trauma of lost children or stolen milk, to achieve sensual satisfaction, or to relieve their engorged breasts. These motivations provide a new understanding of the

desiring subject, situated around breastmilk and its associated power, and are not exclusive to any one society. They are, however, importantly informed by complementary interpretation, particularly in the context of oppressive social orders that disempower women, servants and wives.

Finally, I use the term “South Asian” strategically when applicable throughout the dissertation. South Asia is intended to encompass the plural geographic locations of the authors and texts that I use from this region as well as their disparate political associations. Kamani, for instance, unlike Tabassum or Devi, writes in English and resides in North America, splitting her time between California and Canada. Her fiction and self-identity are diasporic, giving her a unique perspective on India’s internal oppressions. She has been critiqued, in fact, for singling out traditional Indians in her short stories as practitioners of perverse behavior, and contrastingly portraying Indians who have immigrated to the U.S. as enlightened. I disagree with this criticism, and challenge the notion of “perversity” in my analysis of her story “Younger Wife.” Kamani’s collection, *Jungle Girl*, from which this story comes, has entered the canon of South Asian diaspora fiction, which includes writers from Sri Lanka, Canada, and the Caribbean in addition to regions in the Indian subcontinent. I therefore utilize the term in part to succinctly link what are sometimes physically diffuse origins that retain key shared cultural features such as family structure, employment of servants, and knowledge of if not adherence to Hindu tenets and a caste system (I am speaking here of details relevant to the texts I specifically employ, not the entire South Asian region).

Avoiding Bovine Repose

I hope that this dissertation continues dialogue about the communities it addresses and initiates analysis where previously there was none. I view the collection of challenging representations of breastfeeding as an important, if limited, cultural archive that emphasizes the experiences of subjugated women and their resourceful, occasionally desperate measures of response to the appropriation of their milk. Due to the relative lack of power their status in their communities allows (to servants, slaves, wives, etc.), these characters utilize uncommon methods to claim their subjectivity, though their marginal status may, in fact, contribute to the women's ability to act in unconventional ways. Writing about maternal representation and discourse within the African American literary tradition, Marianne Hirsch expands this argument:

If maternal discourse can emerge in one particular feminist tradition, it may not be surprising that it should be one that is in itself marginal—or, to borrow a term from Rachel Blau du Plessis, 'ambiguously (non-)hegemonic'—and therefore more ready to bond with mothers and daughters, and let go of paternal, fraternal, or filial approval. (416)

Hirsch's essay, "Maternal Narratives: 'Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood,'" emphasizes the mother/daughter focus found in some Black women's writing, which by featuring mothers "in complex and multiple ways," departs from traditional discourse that defers to male-dominant authority (415). Her description of maternal experience is relevant to my project as it privileges mothers' independent struggles for autonomy over acquiescence with the normative abnegation of the maternal self. The unique maternal discourse Hirsch

observes, moreover, departs from that endorsed by sentimental fictions of maternity, or what I call “bovine repose.”

Regarding maternal discourse in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, for instance, which precedes the two Morrison novels I look at in this dissertation, Hirsch argues that the absent maternal narrative would confirm the facts of the matriarchal Eva’s “(self-) mutilation in the service of her own and her children’s survival” (419). This missing narrative parallels Morrison’s later description of Sethe’s experience of having her breastmilk stolen, which leads to her refusal to remain (with her children) in an untenable situation of slavery. This experience, as I argue in chapter three, motivates her escape from the Sweet Home plantation, while her breastmilk, coded as belonging to her children, fuels her fugitive travel. This development within Morrison’s corpus demonstrates my choice of particular texts that portray previously- or otherwise absent portions of maternal discourse that would leave us only the cryptic bovine model.

The structures of authority represented by Hirsch’s list of fathers, brothers, or children in my study include racial-slavery, which makes property of people and doubly enslaves women; marriage, which may discount women’s ownership of property or themselves; and caste and religious devotion, which complicates self-realization by combining proscriptions of ritual attendance with appropriate gendered behavior. The hegemonic ambiguity in these models refers to their gradations of female experience provided by accidents of birth such as race, caste, or class identity that allow individual women greater or lesser authority. This female authority, which is also present in extended families between mothers-in-law and young wives, between employer and

employed, and between slaveholders and their servants, has the potential to cause women to exploit other women or girls. My analyses of these texts are therefore additionally valuable for their critically feminist, nuanced examination of women's relationships with authority and the power that comes from owning oneself.

Other scholars have begun to intervene in the dominant discourse surrounding maternal experience, including a few that also examine representations of breastfeeding. Edith Frampton proposes that increased emphasis be placed on embodiment in analyses of these representations. Frampton's dissertation research looks at two of the same novels I examine, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, and addresses what she identifies as Morrison's preoccupation with corporeality, indicated by her "emphatic...foreground[ing of] the mother's body and particularly the breastfeeding subject" (145). Frampton convincingly reads the somatic significance of Morrison's scenes of lactation as constitutive of empowered, African-American maternal subjects. Such embodiment, and indeed Frampton's reading of it, relies heavily on psychoanalytic theory about the self and its interconnection with others in a way that my project only briefly explores. Frampton, for example, refers to Melanie Klein's work on "introjection" (1975) in which the nursing child imagines literally ingesting the mother's breast to thereby possess it (qtd. in Frampton 161). My readings are, in contrast, more materialist or economically based, though I occasionally draw from the insight of psychoanalytic theory as well.

Sudhir Kakar's *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* assists my interpretation of the South Asian short stories, while Klein's theory helps to inform my reading of *Beloved*'s portrayal of a murdered infant's arrested

development and insatiable hunger for her mother, which threatens the mother's survival; Frampton writes about this phenomenon as well.²¹ Despite the risk posed by emotionally voracious recipients of breastfeeding, Frampton emphasizes the empowering elements of nurturing and "the ethics of caring and personal accountability" learned through embodied, self-confident mothering (144). This empowerment, we concur, may be used by African American mothers in particular to counter what Linda Blum names "the historical legacies that threaten to entrap and define their bodies" (Blum 179).

Transgressive Mothers

My interest in this topic began in an undergraduate senior philosophy seminar on "the gift." We read texts by Claude Levi-Strauss, Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida, and George Bataille, who piqued my curiosity about gendered exchange and social transactions. In addition to explorations of giving in various cultural and philosophical discourses on ownership, the subject, and loss, the course and its inimitable professor encouraged me to consider critical intersections between scholarly fields, which resonated with my interdisciplinary interests. An English major concentrating in Gender and Women's Studies, I wrote my final paper on representations of maternal sacrifice in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973). Set in the African-American Ohio hillside community of Medallion from 1919 through 1965, the novel features the matriarchal Eva Peace who presides over a household of children—both young and adult, her own and community castaways; her motherlove toward them seems boundless. Yet when her son returns from

²¹ For more on the psychoanalytic in *Beloved* see Frampton, esp. p. 152.

World War I addicted to heroin and unable to support himself, Eva incinerates him in his bed. Sensing Plum's desire to crawl back into her womb, Eva makes the decision to help him die "like a man" when he can no longer live like one (71-72). I argued that the mother might more appropriately than any other agent give the gift of life *and* of death to her most valued possession: her beloved "baby boy."

In the years since I wrote this paper, I have taught *Sula* to undergraduates who feel outraged over Eva's sacrifice of her son, which they interpret as an unconscionably selfish act, particularly for a mother. In doing so they disregard the novel's extensive examples of Eva's otherwise selfless devotion to her children, which include losing her leg in an insurance scam to procure food to feed them and throwing herself from a third-storey window to douse the flames engulfing her daughter's burning body. The blurring of boundaries between Eva's body and her children's illustrates a particularly compelling element of Morrison's complex concept of motherlove, which permeates many of her novels, including the two I address in chapters two and three. Taken out of context or gauged by romantic, middle-class, Euro-American concepts of maternity, motherlove gets miscoded as ill regulated or not as substantially fulfilling for children as it is for their mothers, an interpretation challenged by many Morrison scholars along with Black feminists more generally.²² My students' shock at Plum's mode of death is nevertheless understandable; their indignation, however, seems to stem from the dissonance between

²² See Andrea O'Reilly's "Introduction" to *Toni Morrison: A Politics of the Heart*, which extensively quotes Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and others on the topic of African-American maternal identity. O'Reilly contends that "the myth that motherlove is unconditional...underpins contemporary ideological constructions of motherhood and is at the heart of motherblame," p. 59.

Eva's act and typical images of the martyr mother, which suggests that they have been conditioned to judge maternal characters against an incomplete, if not culturally imprecise model.

Combining notions of maternity and rebellion complicates each term's discrete definition. Just as conventional images of breastfeeding describe it as non-controversial and soothing, maternity as a literary trope typically invokes notions of nurturance, fecundity, and self-abnegating love. Though the trope may be employed politically, as in calls to arms in the mother/country's service or returns to the fabled Motherland, even in these cases motherhood serves as a unifying concept that resists individual exception. Rebellion, on the other hand, constitutes difference by definition, and a force to be resisted or manipulated. It is the use of an explicitly maternal act, that is, breastfeeding in a rebellious way, that sets new precedents for maternal transgression.

In addition to improving comprehension of texts that feature subversive breast-giving, my goal in making these claims about female agency and property is to urge a reexamination of our received beliefs about maternal figures and what their bodies can do. I am aided in this endeavor by the literature, which by expanding the range of imaginable experiences involving breastfeeding and identity, prioritize women as subject figures and their milk as material—not symbolic. I read this collection of individual texts as an archive in order to critically examine how so-called transgressive uses of breastmilk might play into an economically aware literary conversation about women's status as property. Moreover, the dissertation models the value of transnational methodology by developing and testing its own theory of subjugated women's reclamations of self

through breast-giving. It does this work rather than advocate the practice of breastfeeding or aid future lactivism; nevertheless, it contributes to these conversations as well.²³ Finally, my analyses challenge allegorical representations that reify the model of bovine motherhood to fulfill nationalist ends.

Maternal Allegory/Mothering the Nation

Religious scholar Lawrence A. Babb writes of the common symbolic use of the Hindu woman to present humanity's situation, which has "deep roots in the bhakti [Hindu devotional] tradition."²⁴ Historian Antoinette Burton nuances this claim by pointing out the ramifications of Indian women's shifting subjectivities when they are used as representational figures in political discourse. By way of example, she connects "Gandhian nationalism, with its invocation of the Hindu woman as a political subject," with the 1930s-era revolution of women leaving "the sanctity of the home for the hazards of the street (all in the name of India)" (11). All three South Asian authors I examine here are aware of the political implications of their stories, if not explicitly critical of the hegemonic structures within their contexts. Figuring their protagonists as solely metaphorical representations of broader societal conditions, however, overlooks the detailed narratives of individuals' actions and runs the risk of further subordinating the characters to mere allegorical abstractions.

²³ See Fiona Giles' excellent recent compilation *Fresh Milk: The Secret Life of Breasts*. Baumslag and Michels' *Milk, Money, and Madness: The Culture and Politics of Breastfeeding* provides a comprehensive and complex survey of the social, cultural, and economic history of breastfeeding in a variety of international contexts and a "why to" rather than a "how to" breastfeed guide.

²⁴ Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition*, p. 140.

Recalling India's colonial and feudal history in interpretations of "Eve's Sin" and "Breast-Giver," for instance, can focus our attention on important issues of caste and class and their shifts in relevance over time. Likewise with the twentieth-century characters of *Song of Solomon*, it is important to consider how their ancestors' enslavement continues to endow property ownership with the power to own oneself. This concept, of course, has immediate currency in the novels set in the antebellum period: *Property* and *Beloved*. I draw a loose comparison between these two historical legacies of real or de facto colonization to connect my complementary readings. These readings suggest that the histories of being considered as property—to be conquered, appropriated, or sold—lead to subversive alternative means of laying claim to oneself (I allude here to the transitive model of Kawash's "fugitivity," which allows former property to "steal" herself or her innate possessions: her children or breastmilk); however, both cases present the danger of overdetermining these historical frameworks and the potential power of breast-giving to undermine them.

Fugitivity and the Limits of Resistance

In the introduction to her book *Real and Imagined Women*, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan quotes at length from her review of Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha's anthology *Women Writing in India*. The excerpted passage addresses what seems to her to be "the broad problematic of all postcolonial feminist criticism," which includes "the opposition between *politics* and *aesthetics* in the feminist critical enterprise, and the problem of subaltern, specifically gendered, *resistance*, in relation to writing" (Rajan 2, original

emphasis). Resistance, the second of the issues Rajan addresses is specifically germane to my selection of literary works featuring subaltern women. Rajan implies that Tharu and Lalitha's insistence on naming selected texts by Indian women as politically resistant essentializes both the agenda of the authors and of feminist critics responding to it. Rajan notes Tharu and Lalitha's attempt to recover texts previously "offered by traditional literary historians as works operating *within* formal conventions," which often leads to their superficial misreading. To rectify this loss, they urge feminist audiences of their anthology to "read [these texts] in a new way ... for the gestures of defiance or subversion implicit in them"; Rajan protests this charge to "*read* resistance," which runs the danger of fabrication (3). Deliberately "reading resistance," she claims, particularly to serve an agenda that may be unsupported by the text, risks myriad negative consequences. I agree with Rajan that, "it is time for a judicious review of the politics of women's writing—one which recognizes that it is not always resistant, and which historicizes its conformism scrupulously" (5). For an example of how best to do this, I return to Black feminist theory and scholarship on Harriet Jacobs' narrative, which exemplifies both efforts to *read* resistance and the potential pitfalls of doing so unscrupulously.

In an article entitled "'Loopholes of Retreat': Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," Valerie Smith identifies the cultural "restraints" against which Jacobs, a "nineteenth-century black woman, former slave, and writer," fought in producing her narrative of enslavement, enclosure and achievement of freedom (214). Smith offers a valuable and careful analysis of Jacobs's language and

potentially “secreted” subversive plot centered around her seven-year retreat into the tiny “loophole” garret above her grandmother’s shed. Noting that predominantly male-authored slave narratives privileged “rugged individuality, physical strength, and geographical mobility” (217), Smith details the ways in which *Incidents* borrows from the sentimental fiction genre familiar to its original audience of white, middle-class (primarily female) readers, and contends that “Jacobs exercised authority...[and] triumph[ed]” over the limitations of both literary forms (222-23). Rather than addressing how Jacobs resisted “the economics of her oppression” in terms of her lived experience, Smith considers her rhetorical means of doing so through writing, even while retaining literary conventions.²⁵

Like Smith’s emancipatory reading of Jacobs’ narrative, Michelle Burnham offers the supposition that *Incident*’s chapter entitled “The Loophole of Retreat” is both literally central in Jacobs’s narrative—“as the hinge which balances twenty chapters on either side”—and significant to her exploration of possible “resistance in any discursive structure” (54). Using the basis of Foucauldian theory of the subject as “produced by institutional structures,” Burnham argues that in hiding in the most obvious place “imaginable: in her own grandmother’s house ... in the center of her master Dr. Flint’s domain,” Jacobs is able to doubly escape “from slavery” and release “her narrative ... from the constraints which her culture necessarily imposes on it” (54). In contrast, Samira Kawash thoroughly investigates the limitations of the “loophole” by exploring its effect on Jacobs’s subjectivity. Reviewing Jacobs’ case and the liberating readings of it,

²⁵ Houston Baker offers a more pragmatic analysis of Jacobs’s narrative in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*.

Kawash counts the physical toll on Jacobs's body as "the price of removing herself from the economy of master and slave," and concludes, "If the loophole is an escape, it is not a triumph" (286). Though her garret retreat successfully protected Jacobs from discovery, the figurative space she inhabited while in hiding was that of a fugitive which can house "no thing" and "no one," neither a slave nor a person; thus for seven years Jacobs, in a sense, did not exist.

Kawash's excellent article "Fugitive Properties" offers a useful rubric for thinking about subjugated women's relationship to property and the implications of giving what is not their own by law to give. I base my interpretations of relative resistance through breastfeeding on her provocative interpretation of fugitivity and identify breastmilk as the integral material these characters negotiate. Though the fabled maternal instinct suggests that nothing could be more natural than a woman nursing her child or others who need her milk, the lactating mother who is someone's *property* loses the right to provide this service outside the conscripted bounds of her owner's determination. Should she presume to act as if she has the right of self-ownership, she enters into fugitivity: a liminal space outside of economic exchange, which can never wholly escape its parameters. Proving the value of inhabiting this apparent paradox is this dissertation's main goal. Its literary depictions of breast-giving as insurgence, while not overtly emancipating, expose the fallacy that subjugating people will arrest their desire for autonomy, and that naturalizing breastfeeding removes its self-determining potential. It is through the paradox of propertied property—of owning one's body—that the negotiation of selfhood must be waged; here we will find that milk indeed matters.

Chapter 1
“Hers by right and by law”:
Human Bondage and Personal Possession in Valerie Martin’s *Property*

Enslaved women living in the antebellum American South inhabited a role that was both sexual and economic. As their owner’s property, they represented a financial investment often connected to the promise of self-perpetuating wealth.²⁶ Their bodies, if reproductively viable, contained the potential to create more slaves who would contribute to the owner’s estate, augmenting his (the typical slaveholder was male) possessions and therefore his reputation as a well-off citizen. Whether this reproduction occurred voluntarily among slaves or was forced by the owner himself, his relatives or overseer, the slaveholder ultimately benefited from the increase of laborers on his land, servants in his house, or chattel to be sold in the slave market. This standard narrative was aided by “the white master’s consciously constructed view of black female sexuality,” which was used to justify the habitual sexual and economic exploitation of these women (Hine and Wittenstein 290).

Aware of their status as objects of white men’s lust, as well as their reproductive value, enslaved women were occasionally able to manipulate these features for their own benefit. Suspicion of this manipulation, coupled with resentment of their black counterparts’ erotic if denigrated allure, affected female slaveholders as well.²⁷ If married, these women, though free, lived with their own sexual and economic

²⁶ As Toni Morrison writes in *Beloved*, female slaves were considered “property that reproduces itself without cost” (228).

²⁷ I use the term “denigrated” advisedly, with awareness of its racist connotations. It seems appropriate in this context that eroticized and simultaneously maligned the exotic.

vulnerability. Property laws of the nineteenth century ensured that men owned not only their personal effects, but all that their wives brought into or produced while married as well. Even slaveholding women were therefore financially reliant, save in exceptional circumstances, on their husbands' benevolence or acknowledgement of what they contributed to the estate, which was often seen as merely reproductive. Married white women thus shared complex similarities with their slaves as their master/husband's property. As this chapter will show, enslaved and slaveholding women's access to power and opportunity for agency differed significantly; investigating these distinctions, however, emphasizes these women's common property status and elucidates how embodied actions such as breastfeeding might affect their unique identities.

Just as their bodies, reproductive systems, and children were considered their male owners' property, antebellum women were often forced to treat what would be, under different circumstances, intimate sexual activities as extensions of their labor. For slaves, moreover, their awareness of the sexual and economic dualism with which I open this essay could extend to breastfeeding, making it possible for them to use this activity to negotiate trades with those in power. I acknowledge that this was not an option commonly employed. Certainly some women drew the line at manipulative breastfeeding and would not consider capitalizing on the appropriation of their bodies in this way. Chapter three of this dissertation, for instance, addresses an enslaved character's rejection of this appropriation in Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*. Merely being aware that their breastmilk could be treated as a commodity by others did not ensure that enslaved women would necessarily practice this treatment themselves. The option, however,

suggests one intriguing method by which they could, as property, also own the so-called property produced by their bodies.

Valerie Martin's 2003 novel *Property* imagines this option. With the benefit of hindsight and historical study, it returns to the nineteenth century to examine the intricate overlap of property in the lives of its white slaveholding protagonist and her black female servant. Set in 1828 Louisiana, the fictionalized memoir chronicles the trials of Manon Gaudet, a beautiful but bitter product of New Orleans high society who survives marriage to a financially inept husband, a violent slave rebellion, and the contested ownership of the personal servant she receives from her aunt as a wedding present. Throughout the novel, Manon critiques her society's paternalistic property laws that grant her husband access to all that is hers, including her servant, while restricting her own opportunity for economic freedom.²⁸ Manon resents that despite her free status in a slaveholding society, she remains subject to the legally sanctioned authority of her husband to control her possessions. Believing that her dependent marital position threatens her identity as an autonomous, i.e., propertied, individual, Manon turns to her relationship with her slave Sarah, whose loyalty she requires to assure her tenuous status as possessor.

Never explicitly equating her marriage with human bondage, which the novel urges its readers to do, Manon repeatedly refers to the vulnerable state of her human and material property, selfishly noting how its loss or mishandling affects her reputation. She

²⁸ In highlighting her husband's sexual indiscretions the fictive nature of Manon's account differs from actual journals of slaveholders and their wives, which, as Harryette Mullen reports, include "not surprisingly ... scarce documentation of sexual abuse" (262). Manon's "documentation" sympathetically represents her participation in this abuse.

despairs of her husband's poor investment skills and perverse treatment of his slaves, which embarrasses her respectability rather than offends her humanity, and bewails his ultimate right of possession over what she believes to be rightfully hers. Manon's chief complaint regards Gaudet's relationship with Sarah, the young, light-skinned slave she brings into her marriage and with whom he conceives two children. This production of potential heirs outside of wedlock causes Manon additional consternation, as she and Gaudet have no children, while her husband's presumptuous sexual appropriation of her slave most egregiously offends her pride. (Although she does not explicitly claim it, we can also assume her sense of uselessness highlighted by her husband and slave's productive union.) Manon's increasing efforts to reinstate her vulnerable claim of Sarah as *her* property are made more insidious given her parallel hated dependence on Gaudet as his wife.

Sarah's breastmilk remarkably becomes the tool that Manon chooses to challenge the social codes of property law. Imagining that her husband allows Sarah to keep nursing her infant daughter instead of weaning her for sale so that he may suckle from her breasts for his own pleasure, Manon drinks from Sarah's breast, too, taking her milk to declare her right of possession over her. She justifies this breast-taking as a way to reclaim the property her husband appropriates in bedding her slave and as a method of reasserting the autonomous ownership that she longs for. Her secondary motivation seems to be envy of what she imagines Sarah has done; that is, traded suckling privileges for prolonged access to her child, thereby acting as an economic subject in a way Manon

herself cannot. Finally, Manon's subconscious desire to sexually possess Sarah and fear that Sarah will desert her further provoke her behavior.

Manon's motivations for being sole proprietor of Sarah's body and what it can produce are intricately entwined with her identity as a (non-reproductive) wife and insecurity surrounding it. The seventy-five pages preceding the breast-taking scene are filled with her peevish complaints and resentment towards her marital and slaveholding situation, which indicate her dissatisfaction. Recognizing that these motivations in no way justify Manon's violation of Sarah any more than her fantasy of Sarah's trade does, I work toward an analysis of how the novel's unusual representation of breastfeeding might illuminate the intersection of vulnerabilities and desire for autonomy on both the free and enslaved female characters' parts. Additionally, given the paucity of discussion about property in relation to the breast-taking scene evident in reviews of the novel (a rather odd oversight given the book's title), I consider how the reception of the text demonstrates impediments to recognizing the significance of scenes of breastfeeding in literature on their economic contexts.

Breast-Taking

After ten years of marriage, which require her regular presence at her planter husband's country estate rather than in the city whose pleasures she prefers, Manon Gaudet daily laments her existence. Since her boredom is only occasionally punctuated by brief visits from neighboring planters or friends from New Orleans, Manon regularly enlists the company of her servant Sarah "on the pretense that she is of some use to" her (Martin 6). In addition to serving at meals (due to the Gaudets' unconventional lack of a

male butler), Sarah's official duties include dressing her mistress's hair and fanning her while Manon sews²⁹; unofficially, her presence provides intrigue and distraction for Manon to puzzle over. The first few pages of her memoir introduce Sarah's "beautiful and vicious little wildcat" of a son, conceived with Manon's husband two years into their marriage, and mention Gaudet's fear that Sarah is poisoning his food (5). Although Manon tries to goad Sarah into conversation about this possibility, perhaps seeking an alliance in their remote situation, Sarah's taciturn manner resists her attempts at conversation. Consequently, Manon ruminates on how Sarah must have "prevailed upon" Gaudet, "with tears and cajoling....no doubt," to allow her second child, "a dark, ugly thing" who much less resembles her red-haired father or brother, to remain "in the house until it is weaned" (6).³⁰ Her assumption at this point that Sarah buys her way with tears eventually becomes in Manon's imagination an overt trade of allowing Gaudet to suckle at her breast along with her child; neither suspicion is ever confirmed.

Manon's resentment thus appears without cause when Sarah positions herself behind her chair to nurse her daughter where Manon "couldn't watch." She describes "the nuzzling, snuffling sound" of Sarah's breastfeeding baby, who "mew[s] a little now and then like a kitten" (7). From a different character this observation might suggest a nostalgic or envious response to the sounds; Manon, however, appears to dehumanize the child through her comparison to an animal that can be as easily discarded, as her

²⁹ Gaudet sells his former butler, Bam, and beats Sarah in a jealous rage upon discovering their intentions to marry. The slaves conceive a child that Gaudet also sells. As a result, Manon's mother "repeatedly" criticizes the impropriety of having a woman serve at their table.

³⁰ The girl eventually grows red hair and is unquestionably also Gaudet's child.

subsequent musing makes clear. Significantly, the precision of her words indicates her uninvited attentiveness to an act that doesn't involve her and presages her later appropriation of Sarah's milk. Compounding her evident insensitivity to Sarah's enslaved condition, Manon claims, "I don't understand why she is so determined to suckle this one, as it will be passed down to the quarter as soon as it's weaned and sold away when it is old enough to work." She goes on to revel in her husband's poor compensation for the girl, underlining the material status of his offspring: "He won't get much for her. Ugly, dark little girls aren't easy to sell. It would be a good joke on him if he had to give her away" (7). Her remarks reveal the malice she feels toward her husband and willingness to see his enterprise undermined even at the expense of her associated wealth. She eventually turns this fatalistic hatred into a power play mediated through the body of her unfortunate servant.

Even the notice of her mother's impending surrender to the 1828 cholera and yellow fever epidemic decimating New Orleans' population fails to distract Manon from her preoccupation with her husband's deviance and perceptibly false sympathy. As punishment for Gaudet's seeming calculation of his potential to gain from her mother's death (which Manon later replicates), Manon brings Sarah with her to New Orleans. She believes Sarah's horror of contagion will render her about "as much use as a cat" there (65); her accompaniment, therefore, serves the sole purpose of causing Gaudet's "tremulous" concern "that one of them may not return"—Manon assumes he desires her own death as she does his (63). In fact, in Manon's mother's house, away from the predatory Gaudet, Sarah remains unscathed by disease but gains a second human

assailant in the form of her mistress. Orphaned by the death of her remaining parent, Manon seizes the opportunity to imagine autonomous life in her newly inherited home. The addition of property willed expressly in her name triggers her heady entitlement and determination to prove that Sarah solely belongs to her as well.

Shortly before her death, Manon witnesses a macabre display of her mother's decay. Overwhelmed by the spectacle of her veins resembling "spreading black tentacles," their copious fluid seeping from every orifice, Manon falls to the floor and finds herself eye to eye with Sarah, who has bent to clean up the mess. Manon recognizes their spatial equality while "level there on the floor," but imagines that Sarah is "looking down her nose at [her] with about as much sympathy as a lizard" (70). Her projection here, as elsewhere, reveals Manon's reticent desire for Sarah's companionship; she won't admit, even to herself, that Sarah offers consolation. Thus refusing Sarah's empathy, Manon rejects an opportunity for comfort as she does again when Sarah tries to reassure her when her mother is pronounced dead. Demonstrating her outward preference for financial interactions over emotional or sentimental support, Manon deflects Sarah's attention by dryly examining her newly deceased mother's account book on the night of her death (72). Her invasive intimacy shortly thereafter seems therefore especially surprising.

Consumed by the echo of her mother's final words, a probing inquiry into the paternity of Sarah's child and castigation of Manon's ineffectual control in her own house, Manon runs through a gamut of emotions: self-pity, helplessness, grief, desperation, and jealousy, the last in regard to Sarah. In comparison to her personal lack

of efficacy, Manon wonders at her servant's ability to achieve what she wants, namely her daughter's continued company. She asks herself why Gaudet allows it. "What had she done to make him agree to it, what bargain had she struck, what promise given?" (75) Manon concludes without proof that her husband's pleasure at suckling from Sarah's lactating breasts affords her the right to keep her nursing child near. This unconfirmed hypothesis shows Manon's suspicion of Sarah's bargaining power, which would in turn indicate her humanity since property theoretically cannot negotiate bargains. Rather than an unworthy opponent, too lowly to engage in competition for control of her home, Manon begins here to realize Sarah's potential; prior to this point she only irritably concedes her servant's agency in relation to her own comfort.³¹ The prospect that Sarah has made an exchange of property—no matter its intrinsic relationship to her body, which Manon also sees as her own—threatens Manon who feels comparably powerless to negotiate with Gaudet. In retaliation, she helps herself to Sarah's breast, first ordering her to set aside her nursing child.³²

The scene, described like the rest of the novel from Manon's warped perspective, proceeds sensually, though it is interspersed with references to acquisition. Manon begins with deceptive tenderness, kneeling to rest her hands on Sarah's wrists and marveling at their smoothness. She then leans toward Sarah's breast, fascinated by a "drop of milk still

³¹ Early in her narrative, Manon offsets her complaints about Sarah's unwillingness to communicate with the admission that "on those occasions when she *bothers* to speak, she makes sense" (6, emphasis added). This description of Sarah's speech as voluntary and its sensible content suggest Manon's prior acknowledgment of her agency as well as grudging admiration and desire for her conversation.

³² Manon previously notes that Sarah's baby nurses with "lip-smacking sounds, like a man savoring his meat" (72). This simile foreshadows Manon's suspicion of her husband's desire to drink Sarah's breastmilk.

[clinging] to the dark flesh of her nipple,” which she “put out [her] tongue to capture” (76). Her word choice of “capture” seems hardly incidental since the act is one of possession. Unable to claim Sarah as wholly her property, robbed of this right by her husband’s sexualizing acquisition and Sarah’s imagined autonomous trade, Manon fights back as a rival possessor. While her clandestine act of breast-taking is inadequate in terms of publicly communicating her claim, her description of it suggests that Manon believes she takes back what is rightfully hers. The setting, moreover, in what importantly belongs to Manon, enables her to do so. Her newly inherited property, miles from her husband’s plantation, allows Manon unchallenged proximity to Sarah in her own domain. In this space, superficially outside of Gaudet’s control, she can finally have uncontested access to Sarah’s body. Her words and actions communicate the prerogative she assumes to do as she likes with her human possession—just as she believes her husband has done. Enjoying her newfound authority, Manon tenaciously pursues her right of ownership.

I raised my hand, cupping her breast, which was lighter than I would have thought. It seemed to slip away from my fingers, but I guided the nipple to my lips and sucked gently. Nothing happened. I took it more deeply into my mouth and sucked from my cheeks. *This is what he does*, I thought. At once a sharp, warm jet hit my throat and I swallowed to keep from choking. How thin it was, how sweet! A sensation of utter strangeness came over me, and I struggled not to swoon ... I was aware of a sound, a sigh, but I was not sure if it came from me or from Sarah. *How wonderful*

I felt, how entirely free. My headache disappeared, my chest seemed to expand, there was a complementary tingling in my own breasts. (76, emphasis added)

Usurping control of Sarah's body from her absent husband, by using what she imagines is his means of sexual gratification, gives Manon an unbounded sense of health and freedom and a concurrent erotic charge of possession. Her sense of wellbeing suggests her conviction that her actions set right a previous imbalance; she is, in her mind, taking back what is rightfully hers. Manon's confusion regarding the source of the sigh underscores her total lack of awareness of her servant's concurrent experience. Sarah's feelings in this passage, and indeed throughout the novel, are silenced by Manon's uncontested narrative point of view.

Manon's actions in this scene confirm the argument about theoretical exchange underlying this chapter, that is, Manon's freedom—indeed her sense of well being—depends on Sarah's enslavement and more specifically on her sole ownership of her body. Manon identifies Gaudet's intervention in making Sarah his consort and its interruption of this exchange as the cause that forces her to retrieve her (stolen) property from his presumptuous control. Gaudet's taking of Sarah for himself necessitates Manon's violent response with her own rival claim, in which Sarah becomes a mere tool of transaction, a means through which Manon enacts her insurrection. The above passage illustrates Manon's objectification of Sarah's body. Though she remarks on "Sarah's breast," she uses no personal pronoun in describing Sarah's nipple, which becomes disembodied as she guides it to her mouth. Sarah's breasts and the milk inside them

represent a terrain to be conquered, a resource to be drawn from for its recipient's betterment; since Sarah is enslaved, her body is not hers but rather property to be claimed and fought over.

Manon's inability to identify the source of the sigh, moreover, exemplifies the collapsed identities of the women in the process of this takeover. She believes without regard to Sarah's perspective that Sarah's body is hers to manipulate, a conduit of her own pleasure. In assuming her right of possession, Manon fails to see her victorious claim of Sarah's milk as a violation of another human being, nor does she consciously care to acknowledge this possibility. She merely takes back into her possession what she believes has been wrongfully taken by her husband. The offense to which Manon responds, however, is complicated by the agency with which she credits Sarah in making a trade of her milk. If indeed Sarah did take part in this bargain, then she cannot accurately be considered property to be fought over.

Manon consciously resents only her husband's presumption in taking Sarah to his bed; it is this action that ostensibly prompts her retaliation. Yet Sarah's imagined involvement in the transaction additionally challenges her mistress's possessive authority and suggests a violation of property laws in that Sarah, herself property, negotiates an exchange of what is not hers to bargain. In doing so, she exposes the fallacy of believing that one cannot simultaneously be and own property. If Sarah trades access to her breastmilk with Gaudet, she then assumes the right of a property-owning citizen to engage in such an exchange; moreover, by using a product of her body as a commodity in the transaction, she takes what Manon also sees as hers. Manon thus feels doubly cheated

by the economic transactions happening outside her control and her inability to similarly negotiate. The truth of her mother's accusation—that she lacks authority in her home, even over her own slaves—further provokes her frustration.

The breast-taking scene spans just over three pages in which Manon makes eleven references to vision or seeing by both present and absent characters whose views she imagines. Her preoccupation with the potentially judging gazes of her deceased mother and husband as well as her acute awareness of Sarah's eyes on her signal the powerful impact of being watched and emphasizes the performative aspect of her claim on Sarah's body. Before approaching her servant, Manon cries in helpless desperation and remorse about her dismal life, imagining that Sarah watches her from "the shadows" of the lamp-lit parlor (74). She then sees Sarah lower her eyes, which "glisten like wet black stones," close them, then "look back at [her] steadily" (75). Manon's gloss of these furtive looks seems seductive, and is another example of her projection. Once Manon kneels at her feet, Sarah's response seems a more accurate demonstration of her discomfort with this unprecedented reversal of physical positions. Her eyes turn to rest on her sleeping daughter in likely apprehension about what is to come, while Manon's gaze shifts to those outside herself and how they might view her outlandish behavior:

I could see myself, kneeling there, and beyond me the room where my mother's body lay, yet it seemed to me she was not dead, that she bore horrified witness to my action. And beyond that I could see my husband in his office, lifting his head from his books with an uncomfortable suspicion

that something important was not adding up. This vision made me smile. I closed my eyes, swallowing greedily. (76)

Manon's euphoria at tasting the "sweetness" of Sarah's milk while undermining her husband's authority is offset by the apparent effect on Sarah of her violation. During the taking, Sarah turns her chin "as far away from [Manon] as she [can], her mouth...set in a thin, hard line, and her eyes focused intently on the arm of the settee" (76-77). Her posture communicates her desire not to witness the violation of her body, which she can do nothing at present to prevent. Her suspected powers of negotiation with Gaudet have little effect on curtailing her mistresses' behavior here. Manon's suspicion that Sarah may look away in judgment of her does not prevent her from continuing; indeed she approves of Sarah's evasiveness. "She's afraid to look at me," she thinks, "And she's right to be. If she looked at me, I would slap her" (77).

This threat of physical violence raises the question of who Manon wishes to punish for witnessing her act. Though she reassures herself in the process that she merely imitates her husband, Manon's preoccupation with judgmental gazes hints at her enduring sense of doubt. Her image of Gaudet realizing something was "not adding up" underscores this discomfort along with the shift in ownership she believes her action signifies. Despite her primary feeling of pleasure at tasting Sarah's milk, Manon knows that she behaves outside of societal norms. In taking Sarah's milk she acts on a hunch, an unproven suspicion of her husband's so-called perversity. Naming it "what he does" merely justifies what she wishes to do herself. Suckling from Sarah has to be an imitation or she would have to admit her independent desire to possess the other woman in a sexual

way in addition to the intimately proprietary gesture she acknowledges it to be. Nonetheless, the sexual aspect of Gaudet's relationship with Sarah is precisely what Manon emulates. She chooses, therefore, selectively from his behavior to name her own, glossing her claim of Sarah as solely motivated by a desire to claim what is hers. Although she directly responds to her husband's sexual appropriation of her servant, she fails to admit that possessing Sarah in this way is akin to sexually using her.

Gaudet's practice of drinking from Sarah's breast in the context of their established relationship would not necessarily stand out as significant to an analysis of ownership; rather it simply underscores the nexus of sexual and economic desires already present in the enslaved woman's role. Apart from its potential effect of allowing Sarah prolonged access to her child, such access to her breastmilk could be merely read as an element of an undesirable yet nonetheless sexual interaction with her owner. An economically savvy slaveholder might recognize the value of his slave's breastmilk as a commodity in the sense that it nurtures the health of a new generation of slaves, thereby developing his property in a constitutive sense. Within the position Sarah inhabits as a house servant, however, whose breastmilk feeds only her child until it is weaned for sale, its greater value to the estate seems unrealized before Manon's intervention. Changing the previously nonsexual status of the female characters' relationship brings the proprietary aspect of what Manon does with Sarah's milk into relief. When she ostensibly does "what he does," Manon not only (presumably) imitates her husband but also indicates her subconscious awareness of the sexual and economic outcome of a relationship she does not share. In taking Sarah's milk, in other words, Manon

communicates her jealous resentment of both Sarah and her husband who participate in the economic implications of sex by producing children, which she rejects for herself.

The arrival of Manon's aunt, Sarah's former owner, ends the scene, reminding us of the transitory experience from one household to the next to which Sarah, as property, has been subject. In each, her apparent sexual allure has motivated her abuse and subsequent ejection of herself or someone she loves. Although her Aunt Lelia's appearance surprises Manon into "leap[ing] to [her] feet," her guilty reaction to the interruption does not compel her to interrogate her breast-taking behavior (77). She enjoys "a dreamless sleep," unaided by her customary sleeping tincture on the same night (79). No second thoughts over what she has done seem to plague her.

Historical Backdrop/Criticism

Although a good deal of criticism has been written about Martin's earlier bestseller *Mary Reilly* (1990), a book-turned-movie featuring Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde's maid, apart from reviews, nothing yet has been published on *Property*. Indeed, I hope that this essay will initiate further investigations of the novel by highlighting its aptness for economic literary criticism and analysis of female identity, which have been only cursorily touched on in the reviews. The surprise winner of the 2003 Orange Prize for Fiction, *Property*, like its predecessor *Mary Reilly*, has received much acclaim for its deft handling of themes such as subservience and lack of freedom in relation to the master-servant dynamic. This sixth of Martin's novels has been particularly praised for its "compelling" and "elegant" engagement with the ironies and horrors of human bondage

as well as its representation of a typically unheard slave mistress protagonist. With *Manon*, as she did with *Mary Reilly*, Martin gives voice to a rarely heard perspective with the effect of shedding new light on a familiar subject, in this case, antebellum slavery in Louisianan society.

New York Times reviewer Kathryn Harrison describes *Property* as a study of “the abuse of power within the loveless marriage between an antebellum plantation owner and his wife, their private suffering amplified by the social context of slavery” (10). Other reviewers take note of *Property*’s alarming scenario of breast-taking between the mistress and her slave, suggesting that this “abuse of power” far exceeds the expected even from actual accounts of slavery that the novel draws on for historical support. While calling attention to the troubling incident, these reviewers fail to recognize its potency for analyzing the chief subjugated characters’ negotiations of power. Rather the outrage *Manon*’s breast-taking evokes seems to be about two points of discomfort that prevent the in-depth study I believe the scene requires. The first is caused by the uncommon representation of breastfeeding as a site of economic exchange, that is, the implication that it can be traded for favors between adults; seeing it thus depicted seems to paralyze rather than invite further discussion. The second is the sexual possibility it opens up between the women characters, which, if mentioned, is typically misread. The combination of these issues yields strange interpretations in multiple reviews of the text. Some, for instance, emphasize the sensuality of the scene but focus on the maternal or nurturing rather than sexual aspects of it. Others, such as Alan Cheuse’s review for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, read the scene as humanizing *Manon*’s otherwise vile character

(M6). Such readings seem to willfully seek a sentimental maternal interpretation. Still others insist on the scene's perversity but ignore the titular implication that breastmilk might be a commodity to be fought over and claimed, suggesting a nearly pathological aversion to its depiction in this way.

Both types of responses seem to ignore the sexual and economic elements present in both the female slave and her mistress's roles, to which Martin continuously calls our attention. In contrast to these interpretations of the scene, which are limited both in number and in scope, I concentrate on the economic causes of Manon's actions and the context in which these occur, which is the strength of the novel. Its setting of a well-documented historical period that made property of people allows an unconventional act to comment on what we now know about slavery. Manon's suspicion of Sarah's trading ability uncovers what a contemporary audience recognizes as the fallacy of this equation: property can't hold property or participate in its exchange; that is, slaves who show agency necessarily become something other than objects, revealing the inevitable limit of their enslavement.

Although Sarah does not immediately outwardly respond to or resist Manon's breast-taking—to do so, as Manon contends, would result in her severe punishment—nor are we given proof that she participated in its imagined cause, the suggestion that she could have used her milk as an exchange commodity is illuminating. In creating this scene, Martin illustrates the assertions of historians with which this chapter opens regarding the sexual and economic functions of female slaves, and combines these discoveries with what was also true of enslaved women's married owners.

It seems important to consider that amid the rash of neo-slave novels common to the last three decades—e.g., Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976); Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), which imagines another example of cross-racial breastfeeding; Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987); and Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage* (1990)—Martin focuses on the less frequently heard experience of the plantation mistress.³³ Pitting her unlikable, self-absorbed protagonist against her nearly silent but evidently proud servant, Martin attempts to draw a difficult connection between women’s experience of marriage and slavery and their relationships with property and selfhood. Indeed these features are apparent, as I will continue to show, but their distinctions remain important to the novel’s historical verisimilitude.

In his article “Reading Mammy: the subject of relation in Sherley Anne Williams’ ‘Dessa Rose,’” Ashraf H. A. Rushdy contends that “The antebellum South was a world whose history renders it virtually incapable of sustaining many romantic ideals about relations between black slave women and white slaveholding women” (1993:2). Rushdy’s comment speaks to the historically confirmed fact that their common gender did not endear white women to their enslaved sisters nearly as much as sentimental eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fictional representations have suggested. This

³³ The anonymously authored *Spring Harbor Press* review of *Property* compares the “authenticity” of Manon’s voice with that found in *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*. According to the reviewer, the Confederate sympathizer Chesnut’s memoir shares Manon’s critique of “the servile condition of white women, the disgusting personal relations produced by white men breeding slave and free children, and... the constant fear of murder and arson [wrought by] a labor force whose sabotage was effortlessly constant.” Eliza Ripley’s *Social Life in Old New Orleans, being recollections of my girlhood*, offers a historical recounting of a perspective similar to Manon’s, beginning about a decade after *Property*’s fictionalized events; see esp. 191-98, 209-15, and 256-60. See also Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (1982).

revelation affects the way contemporary writers portray their characters. For example, despite Martin's emphasis on Manon and Sarah's comparable circumstances, Manon nevertheless retains sole control of the narrative in which to express her discontent with her life, her husband, and the ungrateful nature of the slaves who work for her. Her narrative privilege ultimately reflects the social hierarchy of *Property's* context in which, though a gender hierarchy of the slaveholder and her slave also prevails, the mistress's voice has the final word.

In contrast, Martin's portrayal of the nearly silenced Sarah counters Harryette Mullen's observations that illiterate enslaved women often "operated within a tradition of resistant orality or verbal self-defense" (255). Unlike these women, whose "speech acts [were] variously labeled sassy...impudent, impertinent, or insolent" and seen as indicators of their "sexual materiality" (Mullen reminds us of the sexual connotations of "impudence": to expose one's pudenda), Sarah's lack of oral communication offers little empirical substance for Manon to critique. In the absence of Sarah's words to support such claims, Manon must fabricate her resistance to her assumed "social and legal inferiority" based on what frequently seem to be misread interpretations of her facial expressions and behavior. Mullen adds that the female slave's "speech as well as her sexuality threaten patriarchal order, so that her immodest verbal expression and sexual behavior are continually monitored, controlled, and suppressed" (255); Manon's effective silencing of her servant, by making her words absent from her memoir, enacts this suppression.

Martin makes another intriguing narrative choice in a scene that follows the breast-taking. Manon returns from a dinner party to her “own little house,” feeling “a pleasurable twinge of ownership” in its refuge; she has yet to be recalled home to Gaudet’s plantation (93). Once she is in bed, in an unconfirmed space nearby, Sarah presumably conspires with a free black man, her former admirer Mr. Roget, to escape to freedom. Manon is unable to comprehend the whispers she overhears, which “seemed to be coming from [her] pillow” (93). The sounds, so close and yet indecipherable, recall the false intimacy of her life amidst a black population whose language she cannot penetrate. Even the gender of the speakers eludes her. She puzzles, “Was it a man or a woman? No matter how I concentrated, I couldn’t make out one word” (94). Frustrated by her inability to discover either the location of the sounds or the identity of their source, Manon drops out of bed and presses her ear to the floor, silencing the voices. Thwarted in her attempts to comprehend the unreadable language of her slave, Manon ultimately concludes, “I’m going mad” (94). Given this blatant demonstration of the limits of Manon’s transcription of texts that are not her own, we are forced as readers to supply what she fails to comprehend or purposefully omits from her narrative. We must navigate our way through the protagonist’s obviously biased representation to presume what we can of Sarah’s inner nature or accept that knowing it is impossible.³⁴

³⁴ The recently discovered autobiographical novel *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* (circa 1850s), by Hannah Crafts, a fugitive slave, challenges the image of contented slave life presented in Eliza Ripley’s and other slave owning women’s narratives and hints at the resentment a light-skinned black servant feels for her mistresses. This fascinating account provides a possible voice to the silenced Sarah of *Property*. The discovery of Crafts’ manuscript is especially provocative since, as Henry Louis Gates asserts, it is “possibly the first novel written by a black woman and definitely the first novel written by a woman

By withholding Manon's ability to read Sarah's text, thereby effectively silencing the slave's perspective on events, Martin emulates another aspect of the nineteenth-century sentimental novel. *Property* mimics these novels' preoccupation "with the white woman's assumption of her proper place, upon her internalization of the values of propriety and decorum," which Harryette Mullen reads against the "African American oral tradition [which] represents the exposed black woman [using] impudent speech in order to defend her own body against abuse" (256). As I address above, the latter tradition is glaringly absent in Manon's narrative, which enables her alarmingly solipsistic account of the breast-taking incident, while the contested status of Sarah's body as her "own" additionally inscribes this incident with issues of identity and proprietary rights. The context of American slavery, in which the bonded woman has no formal recourse but must negotiate under-the-radar trades to protect her self-interest, or risk further sexual branding for employing "verbal self-defense," permits her grave violations. When Manon does what she does to Sarah, the enslaved woman can only look away, knowing that to confront her mistress would result in physically violent punishment.

Martin withholds all but Manon's first-person narrative leaving us only the perspective of the perpetrator to guide our reading. Rather than eliciting our sympathy for Manon's position, this strategy exposes the ugly truth of her beliefs. Manon's internal narrative corroborates antebellum historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's discovery from

who had been a slave" (Gates xii). Valerie Martin cites the slave narrative of William and Ellen Craft (who may have inspired Hannah Crafts' pseudonym) as inspiration for her book. It seems likely that she read *The Bondswoman's Narrative* as well while researching *Property*.

extensive analysis “of diaries and private papers of slaveholders” that “the racism of the women was generally uglier and more meanly expressed than that of the men” (349). In prompting this insight from reading her fictional reconstruction of Manon’s diary, Martin achieves the verisimilitude for which her work has been praised. Moreover, and more significant to my argument, she underscores the lack of power Manon feels in regard to her tenuous autonomy as Gaudet’s wife—indeed as a woman, albeit white and free, living in Southern society of the late 1820s. While Manon’s detested insecurity does not necessarily endear her to us, its parallels with Sarah’s vulnerability, rendered more extreme through this contrast, makes her story more compelling to read. As a quasi-historical account, it also contributes to a more complete feminist understanding of the lived dynamics between enslaved women and their mistresses. My analysis of the breast-taking scene, therefore, considers its problematic portrayal of Manon’s empowerment via the exploitation of another woman, and contends that the impetus for this particular form of exploitation is linked to the complicated history of New Orleans.

In his book *Manon to Mammon in Early New Orleans 1718-1819* (1999), historian Thomas Ingersoll describes a wealth-oriented obsession that overtook the city’s fabled lasciviousness near the start of the 1800s, just prior to *Property*’s fictionalized events. He traces these sexual misperceptions to the “queen of New Orleans,” the mythologized “sultry temptress ‘Manon’” popularized in France by Abbé Prévost’s 1731 melodrama, *Manon Lescaut* (xvii). Ingersoll describes how “Prévost’s voluptuous Manon came to serve not only as a general eighteenth-century metaphor for the unimproved and degenerative Western hemisphere but also as a symbol of deprivation, vice, and tyranny

in New Orleans” (10). Though he suggests that the city will be “forever haunted by the restless spirit of Manon,” Ingersoll describes her replacement by Mammon, the god of avarice, as chief symbol of New Orleans by 1800 (10). Around this time, in conjunction with New Orleans’ burgeoning slave trade, the figure of the always available if corrupt consort Manon was joined by another myth: her black incarnation “Jezebel,” depicted in “popular southern mythology” as capable of luring white men into unscrupulous liaisons “as if by magic” (Ingersoll 343). According to Ingersoll, Jezebel’s presumed threat to the dissolution of “the ‘pure’ Caucasian” race caused an outcry of “collective force exerted especially by white women in defense of their own threatened status” (xvii).

Martin’s vision of New Orleans in *Property* reflects this description of the city’s cultural preoccupations, with the sea change of “Manon to Mammon” or sexual to avaricious vice not diminishing the importance of sexuality in pecuniary trade. Instead, the conflation of sex with economic preoccupation contributes to the extramarital liaisons that particularly incense Manon Gaudet—the sexual use of slaves by their owners and the exaggerated incidence of mixed-race relationships between married white men and their free black mistresses—as well as the general sexual economy of marriage and child production by which she feels maligned. Additionally, I suggest that Sarah’s knowledge of her sexual representation, symbolized in part by the Jezebel figure and her personal experiences as an enslaved woman, gives rise to her potential ability to negotiate unconventional trades. This skill, whether real or imagined, provokes Manon’s desire to emulate what she ironically sees as her servant’s greater freedom relative to her own.

And, though she outwardly denies it, Manon wishes to be sexually more like Sarah as well, sensing that female sexual appeal may be tantamount to economic power.

Although Ingersoll's juxtaposition of antebellum white and black women's sexuality is not unique, his association of them with Lescault's character seems particularly well suited to our analysis of *Property*. I suspect Martin's familiarity with the associations of the name Manon in her native New Orleans' history and read her novel as illustrative of the replacement of the formerly voluptuous and now frigid figure Manon by property-focused Mammon and the entanglement of these two symbols with the enslaved "black Manon," or intimidating Jezebel.³⁵ Social awareness of this Janus-faced figure contributed to its contemporary literary representations as well. As Hazel Carby has noted, nineteenth-century literature served "as a major transmitter of an ideology of womanhood that polarized black womanhood 'against white womanhood'" and associated "'black women with overt sexuality and taboo sexual practices'" (qtd. in Mullen 260). This perception of black female sexuality arguably leads Manon to assume that Sarah might use her breastmilk for a trade in a way that she, presumably, would not.³⁶

³⁵ The perceived threat of this Jezebel figure causes the need for female mistresses—themselves embodiments of the subdued white Manon—to control her through property ownership. Male slaveholders' enduring sexual access to these enslaved women exposes the fallacy of their wives' control.

³⁶ I find intriguing Mullen's example of the slave Fannie's physical assault and near stripping of her mistress in response to her beating with a stick (257, previously cited). This example highlights the hypocrisy of white women's decorum that didn't prevent them from abusing their slaves. Manon's violation of Sarah further illustrates the falsity of white female "delicacy."

This historical backdrop and her relative distance from it allow Martin to situate the experiences of two sexually marked female characters (a wife and a servant) within a discussion of ownership, property and female sexuality that extends beyond where nineteenth-century predecessors of her book have gone.³⁷ That is, she combines her knowledge of the sentimental fiction tradition and its polarized positioning of women with a twenty-first-century interest in women's sovereignty via their control of wealth and bargaining power. She applies these agenda to associated issues of selfhood in oppressive institutions like nineteenth-century marriage and slavery. *Property* represents how these issues might be considered from the perspective of a slaveholding woman of the period; that is, Manon's myopia in thinking only of her own oppression leaves out consideration of Sarah's comparable bondage. Martin's addition to the nineteenth-century version of this story is her characterization of the two women's tacitly connected plights.

Reporting on her receipt of the Orange Prize, John Ezard of *The Guardian* quotes Valerie Martin as saying she feels "an obligation as a writer not to tell lies" (5). *Property*, therefore, seems to encourage reading between the lines to cull at least partial discovery of the truth from Manon's self-pitying narration, which is full of omissions and obvious bias. Manon clearly desires victim status, yet it is difficult to believe she deserves our unmitigated sympathy. For example, her descriptions of her husband's sadistic treatment of his slaves, which may be fairly accurate, do not confirm his lack of love for her. Indeed, Manon's evasive strategy of drinking a sleeping potion to render her insentient to

³⁷ Harriet Jacob's (a.k.a. Linda Brent) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is one of the best-known literary examples of slavery's exploitation of black women's sexuality and the triangular sexual tensions between masters, mistresses and their female servants.

sex condemns her more than Gaudet. Kathryn Harrison comments, “We assume that [Manon] deliberately reveals her husband in a negative light, and so we try to take his actions at face value, preserving objectivity ... Overtures that Manon rejects as self-serving might also be interpreted as [Gaudet’s] clumsy attempts at showing affection” (10). *Washington Post* reviewer and novelist Yxta Maya Murray adds that Manon “fancies herself far removed from Gaudet’s wicked ways,” implying that her fancy fails to convince (T07).

Manon is an unreliable source of the truth even as she complains of the hypocrisy of her society. The novelist Ahdaf Soueif, head judge of the Orange Prize in the year Martin received it, contends that *Property* leaves itself open for readers to discover its “clear...moral heart” despite the defensive prevarications or blind spots of its narrator. Soueif explains, “The gaps in the book, what is left unsaid, are very important” (Ezard 5). It is through these spaces that the true horrors of Manon’s manipulations—and the system that supports them—come out. Although Manon lacks the introspection or sensitivity to equate what she does to Sarah with the oppression under which she struggles in her marriage, her commentary leads readers to this conclusion. Of course the danger of this strategy lies in readers’ potential misinterpretation or oversight of the novel’s central goal. I suggest both that this goal lies in reading the breast-taking scene as illustrative of antebellum women’s relationships with property and self-identity, and that not enough has been argued yet about its significance.

Martin crafts her complex narrative around the notion of human property under slavery and women’s material dependence on their husbands to expose the special import

of property in determining the selfhood of both enslaved or slaveholding antebellum women. *Property*'s historical setting provides a prime venue for the exploration of these themes because it looks back to a time when one's relationship to property, and consequent relationships with bourgeois modesty and decorum, was explicitly "shaped by his or her color, class, and gender" (Ingersoll xv). While matters of identity arguably remain significant in contemporary appropriations of personal wealth, the laws of nineteenth-century America more profoundly and proscriptively determined whether one would *be* or *own* property. The categories outlined by the myths about Manon, Mammon and Jezebel adroitly illuminated in Ingersoll's work highlight these roles in Martin's fiction and remind us of the ubiquitous presence of sexuality in the characters' negotiations of property.

The coalescence of the mythical figures around the turn of the nineteenth century just prior to *Property*'s start in 1828 gives ground to the contentious rivalry Manon projects onto Sarah and the white characters' preoccupation with wealth. Indeed, the characters' proprietary worldview³⁸ prevents them from considering alternatives to the paternalistic hierarchy that slavery enforces. Rather than engaging in some of the resistant tactics mentioned by Hine and Wittenstein such as "sexual abstinence, abortion, or infanticide," which psychologically challenged the previous impenetrable ideology of slavery by showing the vulnerable dependency of its reproduction (296), the challenges the female characters of *Property* make to this system utilize—with some exception—the

³⁸ I thank my colleague Lee Rumbarger for providing this apt phrase.

overarching tenets of economic slave relations.³⁹ Sarah's imagined trade with her master, for instance, merely reifies the commodification of her body's products, even if it temporarily enables her to keep her child. Manon, too, maintains her role as slaveholder, using traditionally sexual means to exploit Sarah, though she is a nontraditionally gendered perpetrator. Her resistance to property laws fails because of her limited vision of transformative possibilities; that is, she only reconfirms the status quo through her supposed imitation of Gaudet, refusing to imagine another way of resisting his authority that would dismantle rather than repeat its hegemonic power.

Reviews

The *Library of Congress* categorizes *Property* under "Triangles (Interpersonal relations)—fiction" in its second descriptive heading, alerting the careful reader to think of the mistress and her slave as romantic rivals. The erotic potential of the triangle motif recurs in several reviews of the book, more often than not linking Manon and Sarah with one another rather than with Mr. Gaudet. Yxta May Murray most explicitly addresses this point in her *Washington Post* review entitled "Possession" (T07). Murray compares *Property* with the haunting, antebellum era-inspired silhouettes created by paper artist Kara Walker that depict "the monstrous and forcibly sensual ties between master and slave." In *Property* this relationship extends to the Mistress Gaudet, who, according to Murray, "believes that she is the rightful, if neglected, owner of her beautiful servant,

³⁹ Gaudet's female slaves fear rather than identify with the male fugitives who participate in the revolt. Manon's abstention from sex fails to halt her husband's ability to reproduce; Sarah's body merely replaces her absent one, though Gaudet may not recognize these heirs.

whom her husband has hijacked.” Murray reads the scene of Manon’s breast-taking as “reveal[ing] her desire to both dominate and love this slave” and their relationship as a whole having “the horrifying familiarity of what happens between lovers, or mothers and daughters.” The language Murray uses to describe this relationship recalls the triangular description of the novel’s interpersonal relationships. It is the rhetoric of jealous ownership as romantic entanglement, if not obsessive love. Murray’s approach encourages us to read Manon’s attraction to Sarah as a fanatical desire for an *objet d’amour*; the possibility of owning human property eroticizes her lust for wealth. Doing so, however, elides some of the more interesting aspects of the novel’s economic focus, on which Manon herself insists.

Ascribing maternal nuance to the breast-taking scene also ignores the true relationship between Manon and Sarah, the latter of whom, notes Kathryn Harrison, is “no Mammy figure.” Though the breast-taking scene’s occurrence on the night of her mother’s death makes it possible to gloss Manon’s behavior as a cry for the elusive comfort withheld by her judgmental mother, this possibility seems largely unsupported by the text. Manon is previously too dismissive of her servant’s humanity to rely on Sarah for succor in her grief; moreover, she attributes her motivation too directly to recourse against Gaudet to plausibly excuse it as a mistaken means of mourning. Reading an act that involves breastmilk as necessarily maternal may seem intuitive, yet I argue that in this case such an interpretation must be forced as are efforts to ignore all but the scene’s sensual or erotic elements.

Reviewers additionally describe the breast-taking scene as “wholly unexpected, sexual and indelibly humiliating” (Harrison), “intimate and shocking” (Murray), and “one of the most perverse...I have ever read in American literature” (Cheuse); none of their statements acknowledge its redress of an economic wrong. Their reactions instead suggest a visceral response to the unconventional representation of breastfeeding and perhaps revealingly disparage the fact that it occurs between two adult women. The scene’s homoerotic potential leads to what I argue above seems forced avoidance of the novel’s economic theme; it is easier to imagine two women involved in sensual activity, like “lovers, or mothers and daughters,” than as adversaries engaged in a fight over property. Even Manon’s sensuous description of the scene is tainted by her colonizing language, which suggests we should look there for its significance. Nothing about the experience, even from Manon’s subjective point of view, indicates a way for Sarah to resist the abuse of her body, and the possibility that it follows a precedent set between Sarah and her master makes our discussion of breast-taking more germane to the novel’s titular focus.

Although we cannot prove Manon’s hunch, we must at least consider the possibility that Sarah exchanges her breastmilk with the sexually violating Gaudet in order to keep her infant daughter. Doing so accords her the agency of a shrewd negotiator who seizes the opportunity to achieve a desired end using a means at her disposal. The “shock” factor of this exchange comes from materializing the means—Sarah’s breastmilk—as a commodity rather than solely an intimate substance. (I explore this tendency later in the dissertation in my discussion of Mahasweta Devi’s story “Breast-

Giver.” Many readers of this text, as well, experience discomfort with the representation of breastmilk as a commodity.) I suggest here that it is a privilege to think of breastmilk only in its sentimental maternal applications rather than in pragmatic or strategic economic terms. While not divorcing the sensual or even maternal aspect of breastfeeding from its material or symbolic potential, we can expand our understanding of the activity’s pragmatic range.

The reviewers who insist on reading Sarah’s violation as entirely sexual and not about property overlook the intriguing possibility that she may have engaged in an exchange of her milk on her own terms prior to the breast-taking scene. It seems plausible that she might have indeed considered the ingestion of this milk by a man she likely abhors but who has already impregnated her twice and who has unlimited access to her sexual violation as easier than giving up her infant daughter to the slave trade. While this precedent in no way excuses Manon’s exploitation of Sarah’s body, to ignore the implications of this imagined exchange seems to further contribute to Sarah’s violation by removing any opportunity for her resistance.

Manon’s vision of Sarah’s resourceful means of at least deferring the sacrifice of another of her children to the slave industry recalls Hine and Wittenstein’s discussion in “Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex” (1981) of the “behavior patterns...enslaved black women adopt[ed] to protect themselves and their children and to undermine the system which oppressed and exploited them” (289). Sarah’s possible choice to trade her milk to protect her daughter can, it seems, be considered an empowering use of “the very existence of [her] female biological system” that slavery

otherwise used against her (289). In this light, Manon's distress at sharing neither Sarah's wherewithal to negotiate with her husband nor her physical ability to lactate offers a provocative point of consideration. Here is where my interpretation intervenes in the existing, admittedly limited, criticism on *Property*; I believe it is irresponsible to linger on the "perversity" of the breast-taking scene and not consider what it can teach us about female forms of resistance and power relations between relatively enslaved women. Manon seeks to free herself from the dependency required by her marriage. As a slaveholder she may realize some autonomy through economic status, were her exclusive possession of Sarah not contested by Gaudet. Thus her method of gaining power necessarily reflects the model she imagines between her husband and servant.

The novel sets up the competition between Manon and Sarah by pairing the characters in their respective restrictive constructs of marriage and slavery. Their mistress/servant relationship and common hatred of Gaudet further draw them into an intimate dyad that nevertheless fails to realize a mutual trust; the importance of owning Sarah's contested body prevents either character from recognizing the ironic similarities of their plight. Notably, Sarah's status as a slave offers her little recourse to resist being property other than escape; she can, however, subvert the parameters of her enslavement to prolong the time she spends with her daughter. Whatever the true cause of this unusual circumstance, Sarah realizes its benefit. Manon, on the other hand, finds divorce too protracted to grant her immediate autonomy and therefore seeks to alter her status through a method she projects onto Sarah and Gaudet. That is, if Sarah uses her

breastmilk to subvert her utility to Gaudet, Manon must see her prospects for entering the economic conversation as limited to taking back this milk.

Property

In order to fully understand the breast-taking scene and Manon's resentment of Sarah, we must first explore Manon's sense that she cannot bargain as Sarah does; this sense, I argue, stems largely from her perception of property. Within the novel the term "property" has three distinct applications. It refers first to human chattel and the material effects of one's estate; second, to the dependent position of married white women⁴⁰ in regard to their husbands' legal ownership of all that they possess, including, perhaps, their own selves; and finally, to assets such as one's breastmilk or sexuality and the attendant right to protect them. Because the last category lacks official designation in the law—save the general rule that all that slaves produce becomes their owners' property—it is here that subversion or outright resistance (e.g., infanticide, abortion) of the slaveholder's claim may take place. Nevertheless, both of the slaveholding Gaudets use their right of possession to access and violate, through sale and breast-taking, the intrinsic elements of Sarah's body. Sarah's possible trade of her breastmilk to achieve an end that she desires—continued contact with her child—suggests a challenge to this precedent since Manon imagines she trades what is essentially not her property but rather belongs to her owner. As I've maintained above, this move, whether real or imagined,

⁴⁰ The state of married black women is given little recognition in the novel, though the proposal of a free black character, Mr. Roget, to purchase, free, and marry Sarah suggests interesting implications for how marriage may doubly free or enslave certain women.

exposes an aporia in the law and an inability to contain subversions waged by human property.

Historian Walter Johnson's award-winning archive, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999), enriches our understanding of the novel's depiction of female property, particularly in regard to slavery. Johnson writes of a condition familiar to slaves of knowing their "identity might be disrupted as easily as a price could be set and a piece of paper passed from one hand to another"; J.W.C. Pennington, an American fugitive, called this the "chattel principle" (qtd. in Johnson 19). Though their status was not as transitive as that of slaves who could be sold without notice, married white women usually depended on their husbands' material wealth, which bound them to their spouses' decisions over any transactions involving property. Always aware of this overarching authority, the domestic arena and the slaves they personally oversaw there—cooks, hairdressers, maidservants, and butlers—gave these women a spurious sense of autonomy. In actuality, the responsibility for the aforementioned workers and the protection of all their property belonged to the plantation masters who, according to Johnson, heavily depended on the quality of their slaves to enhance their own identities.

Slaveholding in general affected the day-to-day activities of plantation owners by allowing the outsourcing of their labor to someone else, which relieved white women in particular of domestic as well as field work. Johnson writes of the transformative impact on gendered and racial identities of white slaveholders as a result of owning human property: "A slave could wash away the unspeakability of a woman's work in the field and bring a white household into being where previously there had been a conspicuous

public silence” (90). Though there were many non-slaveholding white households in the antebellum South, Johnson contends they were “customarily unmentionable among white slaveholders” (90). Although possessing human chattel released slaveholders from physical labor, the social benefits of slaveholding on white families were mitigated by the increased possibility of interracial relationships enabled by slaves’ presence. Such relationships were often likewise relegated to the unspeakable realm, though with fewer responsibilities to occupy their time, plantation mistresses dedicated themselves to imagining and policing infractions of miscegenation codes. Historian Thomas Ingersoll points out that the potential “legitimacy of mixed offspring,” could, for instance, “foreclose inheritance rights” for otherwise “white” families afraid of the disgrace of acknowledged racial mixing; this possibility, he argues, most profoundly affected “White women [who] had the most to lose by this disgrace” (335-36).

Though free women’s presence at public slave auctions was considered inappropriate, they nevertheless found means of influencing purchasing decisions, often by engaging male assistance, including that of notorious slave traders.⁴¹ *Property’s* derogatory characterization of these “worst sort of men,” characterized thus for their gross “inflat[ion of] their expenses” and lack of breeding rather than the distasteful nature of their work (Martin 143), stays true to their historical pariah status. Walter Johnson argues that the traders’ ignominious profession represented the worst of slavery’s effects in order that these could be denied in more highly cultivated social circles (25). Indeed, such hypocritical distancing enabled the outward “delicacy” of the white, slaveholding

⁴¹ See Johnson’s description of the slave trader’s role in *Soul By Soul*, p. 89.

domestic realm, though its female members sometimes funded the trader's work. Manon and her aunt, for example, hire an unscrupulous catcher to orchestrate Sarah's apprehension after she escapes from the Gaudet plantation.

Some married women of the nineteenth century in fact "used slavery to dismantle patriarchy" by manipulating its effects toward their financial independence (Johnson 97). Johnson writes of New Orleans resident Polyxeme Reynes who recorded her "commercial biography" of financial transactions occurring between 1833 and 1843. Reynes produced goods, such as clothing and cakes, which her servants sold in the streets for her and used this income along with that earned renting out "two small houses, and the work of [another slave]" as collateral toward the purchase of additional slaves (98). Reynes also used her husband from whom she may have been legally separated as her proxy in the slave market, directing him in the handling of her accounts. Polyxeme's husband assisted her business even when it "grew beyond the bounds of his household" (98). Indeed, during the 1840s depression her continued success and financial acumen allowed her to invest money for her children and ultimately to loan her husband money once he lost his job. Johnson concludes that "Polyxeme Reynes...apparently established *a separate economy* within her husband's household," which ultimately enabled her to head it (99, emphasis added).

Like Polyxeme, Manon's shrewd widowed mother uses her "excellent financial sense" to amass her estate in widowhood. Manon adopts her mother's sense and uses it to keep mental note of her husband's accounts. Yet in contrast to the Reynes experience, Gaudet maintains patriarchal control over all of Manon's property including her sizeable

inheritance. Manon muses, “All this is mine, and yet it is not mine, because my husband can, and doubtless will, dispose of it just as soon as I can get it” (83). Rather than initiate a “separate economy” using her financial knowledge, Manon reproaches her husband in silence, choosing “never [to] speak to him about such things.” She boasts of her talent kept secret from Gaudet: “He doesn’t know I can read an account book, but I can, and I’ve been looking into his for some time now” (16). Aware that his ill-conceived planting ventures have led him into debt, she fears for the future of her property while subject to her husband’s speculation.

Manon’s lack of involvement or sense that she can do little to affect her estate finds challenge in Johnson’s research about plantation wives. He writes of their ability to intercede in the sale of slaves, especially on behalf of enslaved mothers begging not to be separated from their children⁴²; indeed, he argues that this intercession “was one of the ways in which they performed their roles as slaveholding ladies” (Johnson 36). This discrepancy between the novel and history highlights the value of imaginative accounts that can serve as problem cases for study as does *Property*. Fiction such as Martin’s contributes to the incomplete archive of antebellum history that unquestionably included a variety of relationships between female slaveholders and their servants and various negotiations of their material and personal property. It is nonetheless intriguing to learn from Johnson’s research that “slaveholding ladies” would rarely directly contradict their husbands’ ultimate authority but reserved their persuasive power for specific, often maternally oriented cases.

⁴² This historical precedent of mistresses’ intercession also counters Manon’s fantasy that Sarah must negotiate on her own behalf to retain possession of her child.

In other cases, the mistresses' decisions were accorded some "formalized" protection when they differed from their husbands'. Johnson writes:

Louisiana property law...required married men to gain the written consent of their wives (recorded by a Notary Public in a room where the husband was not present) to sell any of the family's real estate, including slaves...the normal function of this law was to prevent unscrupulous husbands from selling off the property their wives had brought into the marriage.⁴³

He adds, however, that "[i]n Louisiana, a married woman had no right to buy or sell immovable property [including slaves], unless she had done one of three things: obtained her husband's permission to trade the property she had brought into the marriage; declared herself separate in property from her husband"—though the two might not live physically separated from one another, which both gave her "the right to trade in her own name" and protected her from his debts; "or finally, by getting a license to do business as a corporation" (89). The profusion of laws regarding women's property and the right to control it suggests the nineteenth-century Louisiana court's preoccupation with the subject and containing it via property. Nonetheless, the novel fails to mention several alternatives to Manon's use of Sarah's breastmilk as the means of asserting her proprietorship.

Johnson's record makes clear the effort Manon would need to make to achieve financial independence from her husband during his lifetime. Divorce, she is told, "could

⁴³ Johnson, 232, f.n. 40. Presumably this law also applied to property inherited by the wife during marriage.

take years,” during which her husband “would have control of the estate,” leading Manon to confide to her aunt that “The laws of this state are designed to provoke the citizens to murder” (83-84). So deeply does her resentment of her marital subjugation lie that she longs for her husband’s destruction. Inaccurately imagining the reversal of fortune his demise might precipitate, she swears, “Though his ruin entails my own, I long for it” (17). Gaudet’s death in fact liberates Manon in a way she previously desires but cannot foresee by turning all his property into her own.

Manon’s one attempt at bargaining with her husband occurs following the breast-taking scene and is perhaps inspired by her imagined challenge of him there; it is nevertheless met with disappointment. Insisting that in her orphaned state no one will defend her interests but herself, she proposes “a plan, a dream, really” that she devises on her way back to the plantation following her mother’s death. She grasps at a “rare... opportunity for honest exchange” with Gaudet and suggests keeping a separate residence at her inherited home “in town for the season” while he stays at the plantation; Sarah would live with her so that Gaudet might, “as Mother so often advised ... buy a proper butler” (102). Manon’s proposal neatly combines her desire for independence from her husband and removal of Sarah from his clutches. By couching the latter goal in concern for Gaudet’s appropriate personnel, she reminds him of the impropriety of his use of Sarah to serve at meals, the critique of his other abuses of her comes through in the process. Sensing Gaudet’s reluctance, she reveals her trump card “like a proper gambler,” and offers to leave Sarah behind. ““What then?”” she asks (103). Her husband “indulgently” reassures her that “There’s plenty of time” to discuss the sale of her

mother's property, but his failure to address her claim—she insists “‘It's *my* house’”—makes her “more conscious of how hollow [her protestation] was” (103). She fails in her mind where Sarah has succeeded in protecting her possessions.

In her review of *Property* entitled “Possession,” Maya Jaggi calls Manon a “proto-feminist” for her desire to control her own wealth, a somewhat damning description for feminist predecessors given the human element of that wealth. In fact, since Manon's self-serving quest for autonomy requires sole ownership of her slave, in this sense she seems more like a colonist. Jaggi doesn't address Manon's relationship with Sarah but compares Manon to Scarlett O'Hara, implying that the type of feminism she alludes to is less about equal rights regardless of gender and more about the frustrated desires of a spent “commodity” acutely aware of her diminished value after marriage.⁴⁴ In this sense Jaggi's characterization is appropriate as Manon's “yearn[ing] for her own income” comes from her knowledge that her options for independence have been curtailed by marriage. She reflects on “the bargain” she made in marrying Gaudet while she “was young...pretty, and...had no money” (150). Believing then that she “had in [her]self...something more desirable to [Gaudet] than money” (151), with hindsight Manon realizes the “delusion” of her imagined “power...which [failed to] somehow accrue to [her] benefit” like she hoped it would (152). Manon's self-consciously fiscal language underscores the material value her beauty provided while Gaudet's decision to take Sarah to his bed forces Manon to accept that her sexual currency is replaceable.

⁴⁴ Manon uses the same type of language to describe both her unwise marital choice and the state of a runaway slave who realizes upon recovery “that his value had been accordingly diminished”; still she fails to recognize the similarities between marriage and slavery, p. 129.

This collapse of the two women's roles as wife and sexual slave of a common master engenders their paired benefits from Gaudet's death. His murder during a slave revolt, in which Sarah assists by revealing his hiding place to the insurgents, consequently allows each woman to briefly experience freedom: Sarah escapes with her infant daughter on Gaudet's unoccupied horse, while Manon becomes sole proprietor of the estate. Yet despite Sarah's function as benefactor of her financial freedom, Manon cannot let her go. She continues to rely on her servant to confirm her own identity and endeavors once again to secure her uncontested possession. After her escape, Sarah, more than ever, becomes Manon's explicit other and grows as the object of her obsession. She therefore commits to her return at any cost.

Manon's Resentments

Manon's need to make Sarah her other stems from her chief complaint that Sarah can do what she cannot or feels unable to do: pass as a white man, which enables her fugitive travel; be desired by men with money; produce children; have sex and enjoy it; and perhaps most damningly, negotiate. The combination of these real and imagined qualities provokes Manon's obsessive desire to possess her servant since she can neither be nor (sexually) have her. Her most dramatic means of doing so—taking Sarah's breastmilk and returning her to bondage once she escapes—can be traced to this sense of inadequacy and the presumption that ownership can change it. I argue that capturing Sarah and finally possessing her without contest ultimately does little to amend Manon's

shortcomings or the differences that remain between the two characters by the novel's end.

Immediately following Gaudet's murder, Manon passes up an opportunity to relate to Sarah's experience and to thereby better understand her. The ordeal contributes to her resentful perception of her slave's ironically greater freedom than her own. In retreat from the band of marauding slaves who kill Gaudet and take over the plantation, Manon saves herself using a "miraculous [but disgusting] solution" borrowed from "the negroes" she has seen employing it (116). In the wetlands adjacent to her home, Manon covers her telltale white skin with mud, squatting to lay it "on thick"—she adopts a literal blackface to pass undetected in the night. Concurrently, Sarah becomes "white" in order to travel north to freedom disguised as an aristocratic creole gentleman.⁴⁵

Her belief that Sarah "travel[s] about the country," passing as a white man and enjoying her independence, leads Manon to protest to her aunt that "She has tasted a freedom you and I will never know" (189). Sarah's disguise enables her to exist with neither the fetters of enslavement nor the restrictions of gender that deeply vex her owner. Manon hates that Sarah experiences something she may not and resents her temerity in accessing the freedom granted to white men who revel daily in the privileges withheld from their female counterparts. Manon's uncle's admiration of Sarah's means of escape highlights its exceptionality and likely increases Manon's envy. Possibly still enamored with his former servant toward whom, like Gaudet, he developed a jealous obsession, he remarks on Sarah's boldness in "traveling north in a private cabin" rather

⁴⁵ Following the convention of Louisiana creole scholars, I use the lower-case "creole" except in direct reference to the novel in which the term is always capitalized.

than “hiding out in the swamps” (164); his comment unknowingly disparages Manon’s own escape. Sarah’s ability to function as a distinguished male citizen challenges the expectations of those who have only thought of her as property and thus underestimated her. Moreover, it demonstrates a freedom Manon considers unattainable by either herself or her aunt since their independence relies entirely on their husbands’ whims and antebellum social codes.

Despite Manon’s hated experience of marriage to Gaudet, she desires the attention of Joel Borden, the man to whom she wishes to be wed but is unable to because “Joel needs money and [she has] none” (25). In widowhood, Manon’s comfortable but modest financial circumstances don’t suffice to support Joel’s dandyish ways and despite the two’s obvious attraction for one another, he marries a woman of means. In contrast to her own diminished prospects, Sarah’s longstanding admirer, the free black Mr. Roget, offers Manon “twice” what Sarah is worth, pending her capture, with the intent to free and marry her. Incensed by Roget’s “insolence” in approaching her as an equal with a business proposition—contradicting her previously stated desire to experience precisely this kind of power—Manon counters his offer. Instead of Sarah’s manumission, she suggests marriage between the two while keeping Sarah in her service, a proposition that would doubly indenture Sarah to her and rob Roget of the legacy of his freedom by ensuring the enslavement of their children “to do with as [Manon] pleased” (171). Manon’s impracticality in turning down “such a profit” stems from her resentment that Roget can afford and is willing to spend two thousand dollars on his beloved. She imagines him rearing “a houseful of yellow brats” with Sarah and rejects his proposal out

of spite, the promise of a happy marriage and a loving family seems so elusive in her own life (167). Manon's envy of Roget's fortune and persistent attempts to free Sarah manifests itself as jealous scorn. She resents that he has the material means to obtain his loved one and a happy life with her whereas her true love will forever remain her unattainable suitor for "lack of funds."

Having addressed the first two elements of Manon's resentment toward Sarah, her sexual desirability and her ability to pass as a white man, I now turn to the other three. Sarah's evident fecundity—she produces three children, two of them with Gaudet—represents a covetable boon to Manon and highlights the two characters' complementary differences. Early in her marriage, under pressure from her husband and mother, Manon visits a doctor who confronts her with the question of whether she wishes to have children. Given the option, she admits that she does not but considers what it means as a woman to resist this conventional duty (37). Manon views child production as a wife's means of adding to her husband's estate; her comparison of her husband with Joel Borden, whose children she would willingly have, equates the desire to reproduce with a wife's desire for her husband. In Manon's view, children are her gift to him and a woman's means of negotiating property within the limited sphere of marital economics. Manon's detestation of her husband kills the impetus to improve his property (we are reminded of her fatalistic commitment to suffer along with his ruin); her resentment of Gaudet outweighs any pleasure that parenting children with him might bring.

Manon maintains a state of barrenness, though not "for lack of trying" in the early years of her marriage before receiving a nearly comatose-inducing sleeping tincture from

the doctor that she uses to eliminate her husband's desire for her (35). Gaudet tells her, "I've not much interest in making love to a corpse" (56), which proves her nominal success at avoiding him. By making herself undesirable to her husband, Manon orchestrates her sexual abstinence in a way not unlike the techniques Hine and Wittenstein describe enslaved women using to thwart the reproduction of new slaves. Inadvertently, she also imitates her father's "failing" to attend to her mother's sexual needs, claiming his "lost...desire for more children" (176). Manon finds her own husband's crude performance of intercourse "urgent and disagreeable, his kneading and sucking at [her] breasts until the nipples hurt, his fingers probing between [her] legs, his harsh breath in [her] face" (37). She understandably resists this process by which "babies are made," yet Sarah's evident ability to suffer this attention and produce two children makes Manon's resistance less defensible.⁴⁶

Gaudet's offspring prove he is not the physical cause of Manon's childlessness. She offers as explanation to the doctor "the fact that the servant I brought to the marriage has borne [my husband] a son, and...this creature is allowed to run loose in the house like a wild animal" (38). Most egregious to Manon is this living proof of her husband's usurpation of her one piece of—human—property. Sarah's children, Walter and Nell, are unavoidable proof of her fertility and the infidelity of Manon's husband. Gaudet's selection of consort, moreover, resonates on several levels. It challenges Manon's proprietary relationship with her servant, her husband, and his heirs. Already stripped of

⁴⁶ Manon's unreliable narration seems less consequential on this point, since her perception of the experience clearly leads to her rejection of it. This is not to say, however, that Sarah desires Gaudet's sexual contact.

economic power by an unfruitful and joyless marriage which renders her a spent commodity, Manon sees Sarah's position as her husband's mistress as a negation of her own value as a woman. Robbed, as she sees it, of any desire to reproduce with (and for) him, but seeing this as her one means of adding to (or negotiating within) the estate, Manon struggles to affirm her sense of self.

Unwilling to vie for the attention of a man she passionately hates, Manon tries instead to reinstate control of her property. Ironically, she models her method of doing so after the supposed practice of her husband whose sexual licentiousness and perversity she loathes. While outwardly condemning his lack of civility, her equation of his behavior with authoritative clout ultimately leads to her perpetuation of the same. She exploits Sarah using these means to restore her weakened sense of domestic control. In doing so, she radically diminishes the distinction between her own perversity and that of her husband and weakens the gendered division of abusive power in the context of human bondage.

Sarah's sexuality, specifically her presumed ability to enjoy sex, subconsciously provokes Manon's violation of her in the breast-taking scene. Although she insists that Sarah "hates [Gaudet] as much as" she does, and ultimately attributes their sexual relationship to her husband's unchecked perversion rather than Sarah's manipulation, Manon occasionally seems to doubt this evaluation (38). She describes Sarah's appearance one night, glimpsed as she is "leaving [Gaudet's] room...Her hair...all undone, her eyes bright...wearing a loose dressing gown ... never seen before" (48). The image overwhelms Manon; she feels "as if someone had slapped" her, though she

cannot explain why. The scene ends with her growing “feeling of dread” and frenzied, panicked laughter (49). Her unchecked flood of emotions blurs with her shame that a visiting doctor shares the sight of Sarah exiting Gaudet’s room and her projected sense of complicity on Sarah’s part. Sarah’s shining eyes and unfamiliar gown, a possible token of Gaudet’s affection, suggests another trade for Manon to resent and a likely inspiration for her later assumption regarding the exchange of Sarah’s breastmilk for her child. Both Sarah’s apparent ability to negotiate and her evident fecund sexuality elude Manon and prompt her covetous violation of her body. Unable to achieve what she (likely inaccurately) imagines about Sarah’s life, Manon settles for claiming her as property.

Manon never verbalizes nor proves her suspicion that Sarah trades her breastmilk with her master in order to keep her “still-nursing” child. She nevertheless believes that her breast-taking undermines Gaudet’s mastery of his plantation and his marriage, his premier authority over both, as well as the paternalistic economy that dictates the submission of her rights to him. Although she overtly stages her affront in opposition to her husband, her use of Sarah’s body is not incidental, nor is her unwillingness to examine the self-revealing implications of this unusually exploitative means of possession. In terms of the success of her action, it never realizes the powerful shift in authority that Manon desires as a result of taking Sarah’s milk. Despite this momentary challenge, her servant remains her property only so far as Gaudet allows until his death, after which Manon re-enslaves Sarah with the help of a slave catcher. What fails to “add up,” ultimately, is Manon’s undetected usurpation of her husband’s paternalist power. Though there is precedent for her sabotaging of patriarchal authority by resisting child

production and his sexual advances, Gaudet never suspects Manon's indirect means of challenging him by abusing Sarah; his murder on the night of her return to the plantation forecloses the possibility of his discovery and any radical renegotiation of the dually paternalist systems of marriage or slavery.

Although she returns Sarah to slavery and ostensibly to her uncontested possession (there is little evidence that Sarah will try to run again), Manon's apparently willful ignorance of her servant's humanity finally condemns her to a miserably unhappy and solitary life. Sarah offers companionship, which could partially fulfill Manon's desperate desire, but she deflects every opportunity for its cultivation. In the final scene she acknowledges Sarah's attention: "She was listening to me, I thought, which gave me an odd sensation" (192). But instead of recognizing possibility of Sarah's empathy, such as she expresses on the night of her mother's death, Manon uses this opportunity to peevishly complain that there was "no reason for [Sarah] to run" from the rioting slaves on the night of Gaudet's murder. She insists to Sarah "They weren't going to kill *you*." Her final accusation—that Sarah escapes with no thought of those "whom [she] left behind"—reveals her pathetic and ultimately unquenchable loneliness (192).

Conclusion

By exploring hierarchies other than slavery that affect property exchange such as marriage, Martin suggests that only methods such as Manon's breast-taking, an onerous option that lacks long-term effects, or Sarah's escape, which only temporarily removes her body from violation, can restrict Gaudet's—or any slaveholding husband's—power.

Sarah's contested ownership raises the near paradox of the slave/free dyad that marriage undermines. Property cannot hold property; therefore, if Manon's property belongs in practice to her husband, then the underlying message is that married women are their husbands' property just as slaves belong to their masters. Certainly the replacement of Manon by Sarah as the mother of his children suggests Gaudet's unspoken understanding of this equation. Moreover, his relationship with Sarah dismisses Manon's authority to determine the use of her servant. He wouldn't use his brother's property (a field hand or a gun) without permission or payment, yet he uses his wife's without remuneration. This seems part of the odious hypocrisy of Southern society that Manon deplores; the property to which she feels entitled has not, in fact, ever truly been her own, hence the failure of her attempt to reclaim it. Nonetheless, this mitigation of her ownership by her husband does not prevent her from abusing Sarah but is in part its impetus.

The tacit causes of Manon's milk-theft are twofold and have more to do with her relationship with Sarah than with her marriage. First, she resents Sarah's negotiation of a trade and its suggestion of autonomy that she herself finds elusive and hence presumptuous in a slave. Within the confines of Louisiana property law, Manon doubts her own bargaining power, which she sees as equal to her physical appeal and irrevocable after marriage. Unsatisfied by her union with Gaudet but unable to imagine another in which she would not suffer some infidelity in silence, Manon believes only independence might prevent her disgrace, yet she cannot imagine how to obtain it. In contrast, Sarah's awareness of her dual sexual and economic status yields her potential exchange of nontraditional commodities, which possibly allows her to keep her child. Though the

trade Manon imagines may not in fact occur, it is plausible that Sarah has the necessary savvy to orchestrate it. Additionally, as a sexually active and reproductive character she has more to bargain with Gaudet than her frigid mistress who withholds sex from him without achieving her desired goal of separation.

Setting aside for a moment the egregious abuse that Manon's violation of Sarah constitutes, we can read the breast-taking scene from the protagonist's view as a bold assumption of independent female rights. It is her means of asserting autonomy. Manon's motivation and her recalcitrant thoughts while suckling Sarah's breast have the tone of rebellion invoked by the novel's depiction of actual slave insurrections of the pre-war South. Her claim of ownership on Sarah resembles the demands for power and property made by the escaped slaves who attack the Gaudet plantation. Their route gives rise to rumors that they might "commandeer the ferry...just south of [the Gaudet] property" in order to sail north (99). This insurrection demonstrates the violent upset of authority necessitated by human property resisting its shackles and laying claim to material possession, i.e., selfhood, previously withheld from its control. In the same vein, Hine and Wittenstein's study pairs organized slave revolts with enslaved women's methods of undermining their sexual and economic abuse through subversion of reproduction.

Property suggestively makes a similar claim, though it adds the hierarchy of marriage to slavery's paternalist system, showing how wives might also manipulate the source of their oppression. Not surprisingly in the context of antebellum social order, Manon adds to the oppression of her enslaved counterpart so as to abet her own liberation, yet she believes she does so toward a renegotiation of authority. Though she

ostensibly revels in taking (back) what she believes to be her own, she does so in full awareness that her behavior violates her husband's superior control. Indeed, she models her actions after what she thinks best illustrates his theft of her possession.

The secondary cause of Manon's breast-taking is related to the first: she desires Sarah, wishing both to be like and to sexually possess her, possibilities that are restricted by her birth and social mores. Because Manon relies on the racialized presence of others to maintain her sense of superior worth, she cannot imagine stepping outside of this sphere to behave like Sarah or the outspoken free blacks whom she encounters, who seem able to imitate the pinnacle of society and employ their own methods of exchange. Their audacity—so different from the hypocritical decorum with which Manon was reared—both compels and terrifies her, preventing her from ever obtaining it. Likewise, Sarah and the free black mistresses of white men of New Orleans high-society that Manon scathingly dismisses embody a sexual currency she wishes she shared. She is drawn to the women's appeal but projects her attraction onto their white male lovers and admirers, resorting to the sanctioned power dynamics between property owner and servant to express her possessive desire.

If Sarah is able to keep her child by trading her breastmilk with Gaudet, her lactation also condemns her to Manon's violation. In her society to be person and not property Manon believes she must be propertied, following the logic that ownership equals autonomy. Should her servant own any part of herself, Manon's own self becomes threatened; thus she resorts to abusing Sarah. *Property's* dual incidents of breast-giving and breast-taking thereby demonstrate the mixed benefits of using breastmilk to declare

self-ownership. The next chapter's texts follow this pattern: they confirm Manon's suspicion that lactating women have power to negotiate, but reveal this power's limitation.

Breast-giving in *Song of Solomon* and "Younger Wife" allows their protagonists to gain limited autonomy in marriage, by prolonging a "secret pleasure" or preventing what doesn't feel good. These modest achievements constitute quiet declarations that reclaim stolen property; in this way they imagine a potential response to Sarah's violation at the hands of both of her owners. The loss of Sarah's first child, the only one she chooses to conceive, may initiate her decision to retain her last infant at any cost. Her exchange, if it indeed occurs, would silently assert her preference. Likewise in "Younger Wife," in which the dictates of marriage permit a husband to seize his wife's milk forcefully, the wife then uses her breasts to prevent further assault. These gradations of liberty from undesirable outcomes illuminate the depth of these characters' subjugation as well as their resourceful recourse.

Chapter 2

Daddy's Daughters and Mother's Sons: Breast-giving in the Family

In the previous chapter I introduced the concept of breast-giving as a potential means of trade between an enslaved woman and her owner in Valerie Martin's *Property*. This trade, imagined by the novel's jealous protagonist, would allow the woman to stave off the sale of her still-nursing child while her owner could continue to suckle her milk-filled breast. This use of the lactating breast by a bonded character suggests a means of subverting, if temporarily, the dictates of enslavement, which would otherwise sever the mother from her child without reference to either one's desires. I suggested that this rarely depicted form of female agency, utilized by a slave no less, highlights the comparable lack of negotiating power held by her childless, married mistress. This mistress consequently "takes back" her servant's breast, suckling it in imitation of her husband to reclaim the possession she feels he has stolen in appropriating the woman for himself. In doing so, she underscores the enslaved woman's status as contested property.

Martin's portrayal of American slavery emphasizes the commonalities between wives and slaves that can lead to breast-giving negotiation. My analysis of her portrayal gives rise to this chapter's study of related property negotiations, here practiced by two married female characters from radically different cultural contexts, who nonetheless use their breastmilk in analogous ways to appease their desires and achieve relative familial independence. Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Ginu Kamani's short story "Younger Wife" (1995) illustrate similar acts of breast-giving that demonstrate my claim that such acts may challenge female subjugation in marriage. These unusual

depictions contribute to my larger argument that female property ownership and selfhood can be determined or challenged as a result of breast-giving.

This chapter develops a second claim introduced in the previous chapter: that marriage and formal servitude share related, but importantly distinct, characteristics that can determine women's status as property. As my analysis of the novel *Property* suggests, both wives and female slaves may be vulnerable to male masters, be they their husbands or owners, albeit to differing degrees. The related status of wives and servants becomes especially apparent in the traditional Hindu household of "Younger Wife," which requires the subservience of both servants and wives to function. The elision of the roles of wife and servant is grounded in the paternalist family structure in which a husband/father/master controls his wife and children's access to wealth along with his servants', and thus contains their economic efficacy. I argue that within this regimented structure, breast-giving can help bring about the autonomous ends sought by the two married female characters under consideration. These characters resist the subjugation of their sensual selves expected of mothers and wives in their cultures and attend to their otherwise neglected desires through breast-giving. One derives pleasure from nursing her son past a conventional age, while the other bathes her husband's face with her milk to avoid having sexual intercourse with him.

These representations, while not as violent or as shocking as the breast-taking scene in *Property*, subvert common perceptions of lactation and unsettle readers who expect to find it only within proscribed parameters of breastfeeding for an infant's benefit. As in the previous case study, breast-giving here serves women's interpersonal

needs in addition to feeding their children. It becomes a tool for negotiating the characters' comfort and a means of asserting their agency. By presenting breast-giving in this way, as fulfilling sexual absences in their characters' lives or preventing unwanted sexual contact, Morrison and Kamani also importantly depart from conventional or sentimental models of breastfeeding to expand our perceptions of the efficacy of lactation. In doing so, their texts challenge social norms of maternal behavior, demonstrating insurgent rather than perverse behavior as some critics have claimed.

Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* has received critical acclaim since its publication in 1977. It is the bildungsroman of Milkman Dead, the youngest son of Ruth and Macon Dead, who journeys through both his parents' pasts in order to develop his strength of character, stalled by his extra-long, pampered youth. Countless critics have addressed *Song's* myriad themes, ranging from black masculinity and female dominance—embodied by Milkman's aunt rather than his mother, to its emphasis on spirituality and flight.⁴⁷ Studies of *Song's* female characters have largely focused on Ruth's sister-in-law, the inimitable Pilate Dead. While scholars of maternity in Morrison's work have paid greater attention to the less dominant female character, Ruth, they often still do so in dialogue with commentary on Pilate or portray Ruth as a needy, infantilizing pervert who nurses her son "too long."⁴⁸ A well-developed gendered analysis

⁴⁷ See Lee 1982; Smith 1983; Davis 1990; Mason 1990; Gates and Appiah 1993; Bouson, 2000. Edith Frampton (2005) emphasizes the significance of embodiment in *Song*, *Beloved*, and *The Bluest Eye*, using scenes of breastfeeding in each.

⁴⁸ Andrea O'Reilly's recent mother-centered book, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, includes extensive commentary on Ruth and defends her "late nursing" against such criticism offered by Barbara Hill Rigney, who attributes it to Ruth's "perversion" (qtd. in O'Reilly 142).

of property in the novel can be found only in Denise Heinze's provocative study, which nevertheless fails to give full consideration to Ruth's subversion of property in her marriage or the significance of her breast-giving.⁴⁹

I pair the well-known Morrison text with diasporic Gujarati author Ginu Kamani's five-page story "Younger Wife," published in her 1995 collection *Jungle Girl* by San Francisco's feminist Aunt Lute Press. Comprising eleven short works, the collection humorously depicts female, often sexual awakenings, ranging from a child spying on her *ayah* in the shower to a village girl who finds work in Bombay waxing the pubic hair of wealthy women socialites. Other stories somberly describe unconventional means of surviving gendered trauma, like "Tears of Kamala," in which an abused wife saves her tears to be doled out over the course of her day's work, leaving her dry-eyed during her husband's nightly assaults. Although an undercurrent of abuse runs beneath many of the stories, illuminating the hierarchies of power between employers and employees, husbands and wives, adults and children, several of Kamani's so-called *jungle* (the Sanskrit word means "uncivilized" or "uncultivated") girls seem to benefit from their sexual educations and delight in the sensuality they discover; their shared *jungle* traits alert us to the surprising methods they employ in these discoveries.

⁴⁹ I resist Heinze's overdetermined comparison of Ruth's "lemony" complexion as the product of "African blood polluted by white rapists," with Pilate, who she suggests is "perhaps like Africa...unfettered, expansive, and free." In *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness" in Toni Morrison's Novels*, she concludes that "these two women invoke the metaphor of Mother Earth...one is a commodity and the other an aesthetic given" (137). Setting aside the inaccuracy of a fantastically imagined, free and unfettered Africa, this comparison gives little credit to Morrison's complex characterizations that is surprising in Heinze's otherwise rich analysis. By glossing Ruth as merely Pilate's "other," she diminishes the possibility of Ruth's agency or self-initiated resistance.

“Younger Wife” makes an unusual entry into this compilation of tales by combining several of the subjectivities mentioned above. The unnamed married Hindu protagonist recalls her youth in which she was considered her devoted father’s “younger wife,” yet as an adult her late marriage into an extended family generates this title’s powerlessness; for example, her mother-in-law refers to her as her son’s “wife-slave,” debasing the Younger Wife’s worth.

As in *Property*, where the possibility of Sarah’s trade of her milk with her master underscores the economic and sexual nexus in her position as a slave, the two texts I analyze here present breast-giving as a strategic means of negotiation within the complicated subject positions of wife and mother. This type of negotiation allows otherwise marginalized or nearly silenced characters to participate as active agents of their destinies, although their participation doesn’t, admittedly, entirely liberate them from the oppressive aspects of their marriages. Published just under twenty years apart and situated within the vastly different cultural settings of *Song*’s mid-twentieth century, African American suburb and the conservative Hindu, rural Indian home of “Younger Wife,” these two texts nonetheless represent paternalist power, property, and female characters’ reliance on their breastmilk in intriguingly complementary ways.

The representation of these unusual methods of claiming selfhood by such different authors, and their applicability in such diverse settings, encourages valuable comparative study, yet the pairing of *Song of Solomon* and “Younger Wife” has no critical precedent. My goal is to elucidate their authors’ similarly insurgent representations of breast-giving as applied to their unique cultural precedent and social

associations with breastfeeding. The chapter contributes in this way to my larger study of African American and South Asian literary and cultural traditions relevant to maternal identity. I make a concerted effort in this analysis to avoid flattening out the crucial distinctions between the examples' contexts. Although Ruth and the Younger Wife both use breast-giving to alter their otherwise untenable circumstances, they are, to be sure, also distinct from one another. Their social and cultural situations, e.g., class and religious status, not to mention their distinctive backgrounds, parenting and marital relationships, highlight important divergences between their stories. These differences, however, provide complementary insights into their characters that enable us to consider the variety of power imbalances that potentially lead to their subversive breast-giving acts. Their chief commonalities—strong connections with their fathers, reproductive value to their spouses and intimations of incest within their families, all possibly connected to their cultural contexts—underscore the paternalist paradigms that shape their lives and highlight their cross-cultural prevalence. These similarities and comparable reader responses to the discomforting elements of their narratives make them especially well suited if not immediately obvious for comparative analysis.

In the following sections I examine the characters' breast-giving, which is distinct from typical representations of breastfeeding in which lactating women nurse their infants for nutritional or comforting purposes rather than giving their milk to an adult partner or older child for other ends. The contexts and significance of the scenes in which this breast-giving occurs give rise to my discussion of their causes: sensual fulfillment or the avoidance of painful sex. I develop the causal connections in each text between

paternal, possibly incestuous devotion and the adult experiences of the women, which in the Younger Wife's case includes her daughter's ominous entry into "younger wifedom," and examine how the characters' relationships with their fathers set up their marital interactions and affect their breast-giving acts. I conclude that as a result of their unfulfilling marriages, having experienced close relationships with their fathers, the adult characters sublimate their desire for intimacy and validation through breast-giving, which briefly allows them the power to fulfill their desires.

While in other chapters I develop a notion of breastmilk as a means of negotiating property, either through its commodification or in resistance to human bondage primarily in the contexts of American slavery and wet-nursing in caste-conscious India, here I examine how breast-giving (also distinguished from breast-taking in chapter one) may challenge female subjugation in marriage. Property in its various definitions is central to this argument as a defining feature of marital dependency, and is differently assessed in the two texts. Material property in *Song of Solomon* is more overtly valued than in "Younger Wife" where the increased stakes of child production garner similar weight (Ruth's son also provides a battlefield for his parent's contested possession). Ruth's literal and symbolic inheritance from her father directly affects her relationship with her husband, while the Younger Wife's mothering of sons is the only contribution to her household appreciated by her mother-in-law. Because this valuing of property makes them dependent on external recognition from family members and limits their options for autonomy, the characters find ways to negotiate their sensual satisfaction through the use of their breastmilk.

Breast-Giving

At the turn of the twentieth century, Ruth Foster Dead is the only child of her North Carolina town's only colored doctor. The bourgeois Dr. Foster, known to all as "the Doctor," rears Ruth in "affectionate elegance," teaching her to value what "distinguished [her] own family from the people among whom they lived" (Morrison 12).⁵⁰ Held at bay by her father's class-conscious snobbery, which his daughter adopts, Ruth's classmates admire her expensive clothing but fail to be her true friends. Their childhood envy of her wealth turns into adult resentment of "the Doctor's big dark house of twelve rooms," in which Ruth continues to live with her husband and three children, unaware that "the house was more prison than palace" (9). The Doctor's wealth and importance in the community shape Ruth's perception of his "bigness," which posthumously persists and overshadows her relationship with her husband. Believing that her father was the "only person [in the world] who ever really cared whether [she] lived or died," Ruth fabricates the affection lost with his death by nursing her son "at least once each day of his life" until she is exposed and shamed from doing so (124).

While nursing her son, Ruth imagines

that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold. Like the miller's daughter—the one who sat at night in a straw-filled room, thrilled with the secret power Rumpelstiltskin had given her: to see golden thread stream from her very own shuttle. (13)

⁵⁰ Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 12. Hereafter referred to in text by page number only.

Ruth's sensuous fantasy grants her the "secret power" to keep her father alive. In the analogous fairy tale, a miller boasts that his daughter can spin straw into gold. His lie indentures the girl to the king who traps her for three nights in his castle, demanding that she produce gold from increasing amounts of straw. Threatened with her father's death and her own should she fail the king's charge, the miller's daughter gives a necklace and gold ring belonging to her dead mother along with the promise of her first-born child to the magical Rumpelstiltskin, who completes the tasks for her. Pleased with the dramatic amplification of his wealth, the king marries the girl who tricks Rumpelstiltskin out of his final prize and presumably lives happily ever after.

The male-dominated source of Ruth's fantasy suggests a lack of available female-empowering narratives from which to borrow, though she amends the original tale to grant herself the ability to spin gold rather than allowing "the odd little man" to perform the work for her (Carruth 303).⁵¹ Indeed, with Rumpelstiltskin's gift her breast becomes "her very own shuttle," a miraculous tool that can save her father's life, though she needs her son's lips to pull forth the thread. Although Ruth doesn't overtly state this life-saving goal, her subconscious identification as the miller's daughter reminds us of the importance of her paternal relationship and disappointment at its end. As her father's primary caregiver, Ruth resents her father's death as his choice of "a more provocative companion than she was"; his desertion of her in dying marks her "personal failure and rejection" (64). The transformation of her breast (and her milk) from the pragmatic source of her son's nutrition to a gold-producing, potentially father-saving shuttle

⁵¹ The lack of feminist narrative models also recalls Ruth's lack of female friends.

illustrates Ruth's desire to control her destiny and explains her determination to protect the act that enables it.

Initially described as a "bit of balm" to get her from "sunup to sundown," Ruth distinguishes her fantasy while nursing as "the other part of her pleasure" in nursing, "a pleasure she hated to give up" (13). Thus, breast-giving is for her a subversion not only of conventional breastfeeding codes that suggest she should wean her child once he is "old enough to talk, stand up, and wear knickers," but a reclamation of the act itself (78). This "secret indulgence" reconnects her with the wetness of new life, glaringly absent from the rest of her day. Even its setting in a small room characterized by "damp greenness" from the foliage shading its windows provides "part of the pleasure" of the activity and suggests a womblike retreat (13). Ruth controls her fantasy and the source of her empowerment but is unable to fight the imposition of social mores that curtail "fully half of what made her daily life bearable" (14). Freddie's intrusion into her haven ends her solace there forever.

Spying Ruth nursing her older-than-infant son, Freddie reacts with amused delight, immediately focusing on the boy's experience rather than his mother's.⁵² He enthusiastically recollects the "the last time" he's seen a mother nursing a child past infancy. In an attempt to categorize Ruth's behavior, he asserts a regional association with the act, and then links extended nursing with mental impairment:

⁵² Milkman's exact age when Ruth stops nursing him remains ambiguous though he recalls drinking "everything else from a glass" when forced to cease (78). Edith Frampton contends he is four. His age seems less significant than his later shock at the memory and fear that his mother's behavior might give credence to his father's intimations of incest between Ruth and the Doctor.

Used to be a lot of womenfolk nurse they kids a long time down South. Lot of 'em. But you don't see it much no more. I knew a family—the mother wasn't too quick, though—nursed hers till the boy, I reckon, was near 'bout thirteen. But that's a bit much, ain't it? (14)

Initially crediting Ruth for doing something “old folks swear by,” his implication that only a mother who is not “too quick” would nurse an older child belies his sense of the perversity of the practice. He ultimately ignores Ruth's agency entirely, lewdly concluding that her child is a “natural milkman if ever I seen one. Look out, womens. Here he come. Huh!” (14). His implication that her breast-giving is sexual and wrongfully so concurs with certain critics' assessments addressed below.

Like Ruth, the protagonist of Ginu Kamani's short story “Younger Wife” survives an unsatisfying marital life by creating unconventional sources of sensual pleasure. While I acknowledge the religious precedent of her particular means of doing so, I argue that the Younger Wife pursues her devotion to an extreme in order to supplement her otherwise unfulfilling daily existence. Her creative range of stimulants includes her husband's deformed toes which she worships as she would a deity's. She narrates her story, which begins: “The father of Harinath has the most beautiful feet in the world. His big toes are juicy knobs of ginger and his small toes curved cloves of garlic” (95). This rapturous praise of her husband's feet illustrates her devotion to him, which, though sincerely expressed, may also help accommodate the less desirable elements of her marriage. The ritual footbath that she provides upon her husband's return from work each day seems to genuinely arouse her (he likewise delights in its effects), but it provokes her insatiable

“hunger” that cannot be quenched even by tasting the used bathwater in further supplication (96). Thus, the Younger Wife feeds her desire for satisfaction with silent insistence on the pleasure she experiences in serving her husband and internally asserting her love for him.

Although it leaves her ultimately unsatisfied, the sensuality of the footbath contrasts with the burning sensation the Younger Wife experiences when her husband nightly does “the man’s work” to her. Finding post-coital solace in sucking his deformed toes, which she calls her “own special toys” and compares to “nipples for a baby,” she creates a small means of solace in her otherwise frustrating and painful sex life (98). Her metaphors to describe this comforting diversion recall that Ruth “regarded [her son] *as a beautiful toy*, a respite, a distraction, a physical pleasure as she nursed him” (132, emphasis added).⁵³ Other women advise calloused resignation to the fire of a husband’s seed maintained through a diet of chilies, but the Younger Wife’s methods are more resourceful. Her oral pleasure in imitative breastfeeding is one way in which the story inverts gendered and aged behavior within a traditional family structure and challenges conventional methods of achieving marital satisfaction.

There is also religious precedent for the Younger Wife’s devotional behavior, including the comparison of toe and breast suckling. Hindu devotees wash and praise the feet of their gurus, calling the bathwater “*charanamrit* (foot nectar),” which they may drink for “great religious benefit” (Babb 62). In his book, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition*, Lawrence Babb mentions a particularly committed

⁵³ I appreciate my colleague Jeff Jaeckle’s observation that both characters think of the source of their succor as a plaything.

female devotee who would suck the toes of her guru Soamiji Maharaj “‘for hours,’ regarding the ‘nectar’ that flowed therefrom as ‘mother’s milk’”; Maharaj, in turn, portrays the ideal devotee “as loving the guru’s feet and longing for them” (Babb 63). Read within this tradition, the Younger Wife’s behavior, while containing erotic elements not divorced from the devotee’s love of her guru, takes on an additional tenor of praise “characteristic of relations between ... deities and their worshippers,” to which Babb adds analogous “interactions ... between superiors and inferiors in the [Hindu] human world” (64). The Younger Wife’s adherence to the hierarchy of marriage and the superiority of her husband—to whom she deferentially refers only as “the father of Harinath” so as not to use his given name but that of their firstborn son—brings up the criticism of Hindu veneration practices Babb notes are waged by some movements under Hinduism’s multivalent umbrella. The woman-centered Brahma Kumaris, for instance, complain that “women are required to treat their husbands as deities, while they themselves are regarded as no more than the ‘heel of [their husbands’] left foot’”; moreover, the spouses to which they are bound may be “unworthy” of the women’s honor (Babb 141). Kamani’s depiction of the father of Harinath as deformed may figuratively suggest this inferior worth, which is later confirmed by his sexually aggressive behavior.

Despite her husband’s painful sexual attention, the Younger Wife insists that he “has a good heart...and could never hurt” her or their children, a dubious assertion contested by numerous events (97). Demonstrating her blind devotion to him but also her unreliability as a narrator, the Younger Wife relates an exchange between her husband

and his mother that concludes with his forceful suckling of her breasts. “[O]ne day the father of Harinath said, while watching the boy suckling, the milk is so sweet, just like your milk, isn’t it mother? My man’s mother ran back, back to the far wall of the room, shaking and trembling.” (99) Her husband uses the Younger Wife’s body as a tool to antagonize his mother who denies his recollection of nursing from her breasts. In response, the father of Harinath joins their nursing infant son, sucking milk from his wife’s other breast with such force that he leaves her gasping for air. The image shames his mother who flees the scene. Ultimately, the Younger Wife sets her son aside to allow her husband sexual access to her “in the front room of the house for receiving visitors” (100). Her thoughts on the experience are unstated, though the passive tone of her description, “I lay back [while] he did the man’s work in me,” implies her resignation rather than active participation in their congress (100). Her description of its location, however, suggests her awareness of the subversive quality of the act, which anticipates her similarly transgressive response to it.

The role of shame in the scene and the husband’s direction of it toward his mother via the body of his wife are significant. In *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (1981), Sudhir Kakar emphasizes the oedipal elements of Indian sons’ relationships with their mothers. He contends that “the Indian boy’s critical psycho-social dilemma” is “how to enjoy his mother’s love and support without crippling his own budding individuality” (148). Kakar cites as a psychoanalytic symbol of this dilemma the Hindu legend of the demoness Putana, who poses as the infant-god Krishna’s long-lost mother in order to kill him by nursing from her poisoned nipples. In

the legend, Krishna's voracious appetite for milk and power as a deity enable him to suck Putana's life away, exposing her "original hideous [demonic] form" (Kakar 147).⁵⁴ Like Melanie Klein's analysis of child/mother separation, Kakar's gloss of this mythical precedence illuminates the adult son's "conflict between his need for his mother and his anger at her," the double bind of desire for nurturing without attendant maternal "poisoning" (148).

In "Younger Wife," the mother's ambivalence toward her son due to his mild deformity results in her fear of the harm he might inflict on the family by cursing them. The Father of Harinath's use of his wife's breasts to reproduce his memory of nursing as a child graphically demonstrates his adult power and desired independence from his mother. To borrow from Kakar, this act of "oral sexual violence that combines both the infant's excitement and his anger" effectively shames if not intimidates his mother, though it likewise has a deleterious affect on the Younger Wife (Kakar 148-49). Her immediate response is akin to other instances of breast-taking experienced by enslaved characters elsewhere in my project.

The Younger Wife's passive resignation to her husband's attack, which includes setting her child aside, recalls Sarah's acquiescence to Manon's breast-taking in *Property* and resembles Sethe's vulnerability to the nursing boys' brutality in *Beloved*. The power dynamic between husband and wife here resembles those relationships between property

⁵⁴ Putana is intriguingly redeemed in this act for behaving as mother toward the infant-god; despite her nefarious goal, she finds salvation in death. Kakar notes the ancient Greek parallel of this story: the aggressive suckling of Heracles at Hera's breast, which causes her so much discomfort that she throws him aside, the sprayed milk becoming the Milky Way (Kakar 147).

owner and enslaved human property—neither of the latter two can rebuke their violation. Although the incident between her husband and the Younger Wife differs from the antebellum scenes in terms of violence and the participants’ relationships, it nonetheless provokes the nursing woman’s deferred reclamation of her milk. Unlike Sethe, whose response I explore in the next chapter, the Younger Wife reclaims her milk not for her children, but as a means of resisting sexual intercourse, a painful wifely duty she prefers to avoid. This reclamation of personal property—the milk her husband presumptuously uses to shame his mother—asserts that her body is her own as well.

The Younger Wife’s agency is apparent in making this choice, which silently retaliates for the theft of her milk. This form of retaliation is in keeping with her devotion to her husband and commitment to fulfill his needs; it provides what the father of Harinath seems to desire, that is her breastmilk, yet the Younger Wife’s control of its distribution subtly asserts her assumption of power. Her method of doing so models John Stratton Hawley’s assertion in his prologue to *Devi: Goddesses of India* (1996), that “women make adjustments...within the predominant patriarchal ethos of Hindu society that allow [them] space for internal autonomy and growth. Sometimes these involve open challenges to the ‘accepted’ order; sometimes the challenge is more oblique” (24).

The scene in the front room initiates the father of Harinath’s evening ritual of suckling “at the same time as the baby, but on the opposite side” (100). The practice sexually arouses him but if he “trie[s] to do the work to” her, the Younger Wife diverts his attention by bathing his face with her breastmilk while simultaneously holding her baby “tightly” between her legs. She describes her evasion sensuously: “I pressed the

milk slowly onto my man's face, swung the breast slowly around until it slid across his forehead from side to side and up and around his nose, until his eyebrows were dripping onto his tightly shut eyes and his eyelashes beaded white" (100). Just as her joyous recollections of bathing her husband's feet indicate her satisfaction in performing that worshipful behavior, the sumptuous, measured description of her milk bath suggests her pleasure in this activity. Unlike the footbath, however, here the Younger Wife uses products of her body—baby and breastmilk—to establish a self-determined boundary and prevent the undesirable experience of sexual intercourse. In doing so, she salvages her tenuous right of self-ownership by determining how she will sexually participate and how her milk will be used. Deceptively coded to resemble that prior meticulous ritual, the latter bath follows a script of the Younger Wife's own design, allowing her to regulate and determine her enjoyment.

The Younger Wife owns her breastmilk in this scene. Her control of its use underscores its status as property but its return to her possession indicates an important shift of power from her husband back to her. Using her breastmilk as a preventive, if erotic, tool, the Younger Wife performs strategic breast-giving, becoming an agent of sensuality rather than a brutalized recipient of "the man's work."⁵⁵ Kamani's description of this scene juxtaposes it with the husband's prior forceful behavior in the front room. She emphasizes the Younger Wife's "slowly" regulated activity and her husband's now passive response. The scene and its antecedent are reminiscent of Sarah's imagined

⁵⁵ The Younger Wife's behavior can be read as an active alternative to the abused protagonist's passive crying in "The Tears of Kamala," the story that directly precedes this one.

negotiation with her master, which manipulates his assumed desire for her milk to achieve a trade on her terms. Like Sarah, the Younger Wife uses her knowledge of her husband's proclivity to divert him from unpleasant action. Kamani's unusual depiction of breast-giving in a sensuous but strategic manner between adults also seems an important intervention that goes against the grain of sentimental maternal scripts familiar to her Western audience, and the divinely inflected mothering behaviors common in Hindu legends; "Younger Wife" challenges conventions of both traditions.

Hot Passion's Cool Demise

In "Othering the Other: Ginu Kamani's *Junglee Girl*" an online review for *India Star* literary magazine and one of the rare critiques of the collection, Kavita Sharma complains that "normalcy is provided by characters liberated by America," while "All Indians in India are seen as neurotic victims of their suppressed sexuality that leads them to unnatural behaviour bordering on the perverse" (n.p.). Although her charge may apply to some of *Junglee Girl*'s eleven stories, Sharma's comments seem inaccurately directed at "Younger Wife," particularly given the indigenous origin of the protagonist's devotional behavior, which arguably inspires her milk-bath. Kamani seems to deliberately parallel the breast-giving scene with the foot bathing that opens the story. The self-preservation and agency demonstrated by the Younger Wife's strategic breast-giving, moreover, strikes me as a resourceful and subtle if unconventional manipulation

of marital subjugation that pacifies her husband rather than a “neurotic” or “perverse” activity.⁵⁶

Making breast-giving the Younger Wife’s method of asserting her body’s possession further encourages our reading of the so-called perverse as potentially liberating. This evasive act not only frees the Younger Wife from participating in painful sex, but destabilizes the notion of women’s breastmilk as solely for their children. With this model, Kamani wrests the mother’s ownership of her milk back from her husband as well as from a literary canon that would require her to selflessly give it to serve others rather than use it to help herself. (My fourth chapter studies this precedent in Mahasweta Devi’s “Breast-Giver,” in which the protagonist dies from her excessive selfless maternity.) Finally, the power of the Younger Wife’s milk to symbolically dilute the burning sensation of her husband’s semen and thereby successfully cool his passion, grounds her behavior in a specifically Indian context, rendering Sharma’s potential cultural critique of the scene inapplicable. This element of the story illustrates Kamani’s awareness of traditional Vedic associations among temperature, substances, and gender, and suggests an intriguing inversion of their relationship that replicates their ambiguity in ancient Hindu literature and its contemporary cultural instantiations.

Ayurvedic ontology associates the female gender with redness and heat, which inflame the passions and must be controlled; rational behavior represented by spiritual purity and white garments belong to the male domain. These ancient associations, which

⁵⁶ Sharma’s comments contain interesting echoes of criticism of Ruth’s breast-giving in *Song of Solomon*. Her point regarding Kamani’s biased national representations in other stories seems worthy of further exploration.

endure in contemporary cultural consciousness, extend to diet as well. According to ayurvedic practice, consuming cooling dairy substances helps achieve spiritual release from mortal passion; red and fiery hot foods, such as spices, meat and chili, connect one to the earth and should be avoided or tempered with superior male-associated substances like cow's milk; the origin of dairy products in the female cow indicates one inconsistency in this gendered logic. Exceptions to the standard female-heat-bad/male-cool-good dichotomy include the positive "redness" or heat of some Hindu gods and goddesses. Male and female devotees of local village goddesses (called *Mariyamman*) for example, assume their heat in ritual possessions during which they carry burning pots of oil to emphasize this positive state.⁵⁷

Intriguingly, according to John Stratton Hawley, "the power of a goddess (or *the* Goddess) is experienced as brilliantly hot—a quality called *tejas*" (7). The term *tejas* is also defined as "splendor, glory, brilliance; [and] semen" (Hawley 327).⁵⁸ Kamani's juxtaposition of the gendered substances of breastmilk and semen retains the original Vedic sense of conflicting masculine/feminine dualism, yet inverts it by attributing the ability to control sexual heat (here initiated by a male) to a female character. Thus breastmilk becomes a source of feminine power. The Younger Wife uses this power to subvert the hierarchy of roles in her marital bed and assert her sensual self even while retaining the venerable symbolism of bathing her husband with a valuable substance as

⁵⁷ For a detailed study of goddess possession in the Indian state of Haryana, see Kathleen Erndl's essay "The Mother Who Possesses" in Hawley and Wulff, 1996. For more on the Vedic associations between temperature and gender, see Martha Ann Selby's "The Color of Gender," n.d., also referred to in chapter four.

⁵⁸ Joseph Alter's study, *The Wrestler's Body*, examines the complex, androgynous symbolism of semen, milk, and dairy consumption in Indian wrestlers' body politics.

she would a deity. The representation of breastmilk in this scene is additionally notable for its rarely depicted mix of maternity and sex.

In *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (2004), Andrea O'Reilly makes similar claims about the self-determining sensuality of Ruth's transgressive (my term) breastfeeding, showing how this marriage of maternal behavior and sex may allow for subversion of dominant cultural maternal codes in an American context. "In nursing her son," she argues, Ruth "resists the white patriarchal encoding of her self as 'Mother-Wife' and ... keeps alive her sensual self, in defiance of a culture that demands clear division between women's reproductive and sexual selves" (142). This separation has special significance in African American history, which included forced sex *and* reproduction under the institution of slavery with little allowance for women to cultivate their sensual self-identity. My previous chapter acknowledges this conflict indicated by the competing sexualities of two white and black female characters. O'Reilly refers to the distinct qualities of black women's maternity that don't require this separation, part of what Morrison amorphously calls "the funk," and which lead her to contend that "maternal identity [can be] a site of agency and authority for black women" (19). In support of this hypothesis she insists, I think rightly, that Ruth's breast-giving "keeps alive" if not reanimates the self she once was during the drenching passion of her early marital life.

Ruth's erstwhile lovemaking with Macon entails deliberate delays and elaborate rituals, in which Macon lingers over "each eye" of Ruth's corset, unlacing every ribbon from its casing, leaving her "moist" and eager for his quickly released ejaculate (16). This

measured description emulates the painstaking pleasure of drawn-out foreplay and its fluid culmination. It also resembles the description of the Younger Wife's controlled but fluid breastmilk bathing of her husband's face.⁵⁹ Even the passing reference to Macon's removal of Ruth's perspiration shields, which he snaps and unsnaps to tease them both, signals a desire for pungent bodily substances to anoint the completion of their union. The passage also evokes the aromatic fecundity of sensual life that is lost to Ruth by the time she plots to conceive her son in desperation to renew it.

The connection between sensual desire, scent and maternity has transnational currency. Writing about the Putana-Krishna myth and its significance to Indian psychoanalysis, Sudhir Kakar observes that scent may be associated with nostalgia for maternal suckling "as well as the necessary establishment of boundaries between [a mother] and her son," which Ruth seems unable or unwilling to initiate (150). Kakar describes the end of the myth, in which the slain Putana "falls down lifeless, her hideous demonic body ... emit[ting] a pleasing perfume [composed of] the odour of her skin and sweat, the smell of milk around her nipple"; in death, he concludes, these scents "are neutralized, transformed, and rendered benign" (150). The complicated allure of maternal sensuality requires this disarmament on the part of the son, lest he be forever drawn to replicate it. Likewise the mother who has once loved and been loved passionately requires fulfillment of her sensual thirsts and will sublimate what is otherwise missing from her life. Years of marital strife wring the moisture as well as aromas associated with

⁵⁹ A separate project could be devoted to the study of breast-giving and its moist sexual connotations. Fiona Giles' article "Fountains of Love and Loveliness: In Praise of the Dripping Wet Breast" (2002) embarks on this ambitious work.

vitality from Ruth's daily existence. Indeed, even the human product of her early marital ardor are described as her "dry daughters," the aptly named Dead girls, whose father's disappointment "sifted down on them like ash" (9-10).⁶⁰ Consequently, everything Ruth longs for in the arid years following her father's death and concurrent end of her husband's desire is living and wet.

Father Love and Incest

The physical manifestation of Ruth's passion for her father kills Macon's attraction to her. The "odious" memory—and later his fabrication as he forgets the details (16)—of seeing his wife "lying naked" in bed, sucking her dead father's fingers, lead him to suspect, though he ultimately dismisses it, the possibility that his father-in-law could have fathered his first two children. Macon's recollection of his wife's apparent incestuous infidelity distorts her recounted experience of kneeling "in a slip at [her dying father's] bedside and kiss[ing] his beautiful fingers," the only part of him not "bubbled and rotted" from an overdose of ether and, incidentally, "the only things his grandson...inherited" (126, 133). It is plausible that Ruth's prolonged nursing may reflect this oral memory, with her breasts taking the place of the Doctor's fingers. Her memory also resonates with the Younger Wife's self-soothing practice of suckling her husband's toes. Both characters, it would seem, are as Ruth is described, "long dependent on self-manipulation" enabled by their use of external stimulants, primarily in the form of others'

⁶⁰ Macon's disappointment comes from his desire for a son to mold in his image and take over the family business. Although his daughters are more educated and ambitious than their insolent younger brother, Macon doesn't encourage their assistance.

bodies; e.g., fingers, toes, or nursing children (134). Their close paternal relationships establish the paradigm that develops their need.

Kamani's characteristically ambiguous rendering of incest allows its literalism to be contested and makes it difficult to determine the exact nature of the younger wife relationship between the protagonist and her father. Like Ruth, the daughter fulfills the role of partner/caregiver for her father in her mother's absence (in *Song* the mother's death makes this possible). She becomes his so-called "younger wife" as a result. Disavowing his daughter's youth, her father insists that she "was never a child," and that "nobody needed to take care of [her]," instead, she "always took care of" him (98).⁶¹ The Younger Wife, however, recalls the special attention he paid her:

He used to tickle me so much! But then he stopped. He would oil and comb my hair every day, but then he stopped. He would feed me my breakfast before he went to work, putting one-one piece of bread and chili in my mouth. He stopped. (99)

Her father's sudden change of behavior signaled by the repeated abrupt phrase "he stopped," emphasizes the loss of his physical attention once his daughter's "proper" marriage becomes imminent. His explanation, that he did "all those things...to make [her] happy" until required to desist "spoiling" the future "*proper* wife" of another man, transmits his jealous resentment that she'll leave him to care for someone else; his own

⁶¹The Younger Wife transfers this ability to anticipate her father's every need to her first son's care giving, which prevents him from ever crying as a child. Harinath's consequent favoritism of his mother causes the resentment of other women in the extended family. This competitive care giving is similar to Ruth's possessive pride in tending to her father's comfort, as she believes no one else can.

happiness rather than hers is plainly at stake (99, original emphasis).⁶² The Younger Wife's recollection of her father's changed behavior—he “stopped talking to me, just like that, and soon after the marriage he died”—highlights the lack of control she experiences in the transition, and is not unlike Ruth's sense of her father's desertion of her in death.⁶³

For the reader familiar with Western feminist texts, this exchange of women between father and husband calls to mind Gayle Rubin's well-known argument “The Traffic in Women,” but this model does not fully address the transformative effect of marriage on a Hindu daughter's identity. Lawrence Babb traces these transformations to the “issue of the structural exclusion of women from their natal families” (149). While like the Western paternalist model to some extent, since the daughter leaves her father's home to live in her husband's, the Indian woman's experience in these two homes may be more dissimilar than in Western traditions, and includes the loss of “the relative freedom that was hers as daughter” (149). Additionally, according to Babb, as a wife and “daughter-in-law ... her role is largely one of onerous servitude” and subject to her mother-in-law's oversight rather than solely paternal figures of authority. Brahma Kumaris believe this experience of marriage leads to women's suitability for spiritual rebirth “because they are used to the idea of giving things up” (149). I explore the

⁶² Her father's jealous fear of losing his desirable object to a more appropriate (or powerful) owner resembles Manon's resentment at her husband's appropriation of her servant for his own sex slave. Both cases illustrate the inexorable transfer of property protected by social and official law: daughters become wives, wives' possessions become their husbands'.

⁶³ The stories in *Junglee Girl* frequently feature the abrupt loss of childhood innocence and sudden entry into adult sexuality, which both compels and terrifies their protagonists. The “girls” often respond to the evident powerlessness of their transitions by claiming unconventional means of agency.

dangerous repercussions of this assertion in chapter four's analysis of the venerated, self-sacrificial "Breast-Giver."

Her father's suggestion that it's no good spoiling her for the hardships of proper marriage, predict a rough transition for the Younger Wife. In addition, his doting actions provide insight into the nature of the "younger wife" relationship. Of the three activities the narrator recalls, being fed by her father's hand may be read as the most innocent and associated again with Hindu religious precedent. Babb suggests: "In the Hindu tradition generally the theme of child-parent love may be stronger in *prasad*-taking [eating food first touched by a guru or deity] than is generally recognized" (147). He bases his assertion on the concept of parents as "feeders" whose imitation by sweet-dispensing gurus may "evoke recollections of childhood feelings toward parents" (147). These typically "positive feelings," as related by Babb's informant, are obscured in the story by the backdrop of a father replacing his wife with his young daughter then resenting her need to marry, which suggests an exceptionally strong, possibly incestuous intimacy. Miriam Johnson's claim, that "fathers often romanticize the father-daughter relationship and interact with their daughters as a lover would," describes this type of intimacy, which can constitute "psychological incest" rather than overt sexual abuse (qtd. in O'Reilly 77). We might alternatively read the father's actions as his attempt to fulfill the role of his absent wife; having someone "oil and comb" her hair is precisely the type of activity often lost to a motherless daughter. Within *Jungle Girl*'s broader context, however, the playfulness of tickling takes on more questionable nuance. Here, play among children

and between children and adults, often extends to uncomfortable explorations of vulnerable bodies, occasionally characterized as “tickling.”

In “Maria,” for instance, the seven-year-old protagonist insists on molesting her reluctant *ayah* (nursemaid), pushing away her clothes to “stroke her breast” and tug roughly on her nipples, which Maria protests “tickles” (Kamani 126). Though she describes her actions as “adoring,” the protagonist in this story uses the might of her class position to manipulate her servant and appease her childish curiosity. She threatens to “have [Maria] fired” if she refuses her advances and ultimately orchestrates Maria’s humiliating dismissal when she resists (131). “Maria” concludes with the foreboding promise that the girl will soon be given a new servant to “play with” (137). Such suggestive language helps problematize passages like those in which the Younger Wife remembers insistently sucking her own mother’s breasts, which would jerk and jump in apparent resistance out of her mouth, though she would always catch them again (99).⁶⁴ Underscoring the connection between breast-taking and the abuse of power, the Younger Wife describes how she persisted until age six in following her mother around and pushing back her sari to help herself to her breasts “wherever she stopped.” Compounding the sense of presumption in her behavior, she observes that her mother “was a small woman” while she herself was “not so small” (99). Her description suggests the vulnerability of childhood shifted here from child to mother and implicitly comments on notions of female bodies as property.

⁶⁴ This language recalls Manon’s relentless “capture” of Sarah’s milk, which initially resists her suckling.

Property and Resistance

The parallels between “Maria” and “Younger Wife” reveal similarities between mothers and (female) servants whose bodies are viewed as endlessly available, enabling children as well as adults to take what may not be readily offered to them. By assuming a right to other people’s bodies, thereby challenging discrete notions of other and self, these child characters ignore boundaries that distinguish their mothers’ or servants’ bodies from their own. Though mentally unable at younger ages to acknowledge others—particularly their nannies or mothers—as distinct from themselves, even at ages seven and six, respectively, the protagonist of “Maria” and the young protagonist of “Younger Wife” insist on their possessive rights to the bodies they desire, thereby reifying the elision of mother and slave. The implication that Hindu mothers must appease the demands of their children, husbands, and in-laws, confounds their characterization as endlessly giving if not self-sacrificing.⁶⁵ Since in Hindu India to be a wife is to be a mother, while “to be unmarried as a woman is to have no real status in society at all,” women generally find themselves in the position of serving multiple others (Babb 142). The Younger Wife’s manipulation of her husband’s toes and other alternative sources of pleasure seem to fit this paradigm. That is, if the wife/mother/daughter-in-law must provide for everyone else, she will also have to

⁶⁵ “Maria” sets up an interesting alternative to this paradigm since the protagonist’s wealthy, secular mother fulfills her spoiled child’s demands by offering her a surrogate mother in the form of a second ayah. The stipulation that she be “another Christian girl” undermines the Hindu model of maternal self-sacrifice with the cultural perception of Christians’ relatively greater sexual accessibility (Kamani 1995:136). This perception stems from the low-caste or *dalit* (outcaste) status of many Christian communities, which make them more vulnerable to potential high-caste/class employers. I thank Martha Selby for this information.

provide her own pleasure. The further conflation of roles indicated by the epithet “wife-slave” condemns the adult Younger Wife to abuse, though the socialized conditioning of servitude in both wifedom and slavery can be subverted, as demonstrated by her breast-giving. I explore potential resistance in the secondary role of female servant below.

Although “Maria” offers an extreme instance of calculated manipulation of an older woman by a child, while “Younger Wife” describes a more innocuous, common example of a nursing child’s sense of entitlement toward her mother’s breasts, the age of the latter character and both protagonists’ acknowledgement of the power they wield in these relationships encourages a more critical assessment of their actions. My analysis of the two instances is not meant to remove the possibility that actual incest occurs between the Younger Wife and her father; indeed, my gloss of the term “tickling” underscores the likelihood of this happening. Yet I wish to point out additional ways in which “Younger Wife” complicates the concept of children’s (particularly female children’s) power—or lack thereof—within a hierarchical household and how the childhood experiences of the protagonist affect her proprietary relationships with her own daughter and husband.⁶⁶

Poor girl children, as the most vulnerable members of the Indian community, are subject to the most extreme abuses and neglect, which may continue into adulthood when as wives they become subject to their mothers-in-law as well as their husbands and senior relatives. The Younger Wife, for example, is nearly cast out of her home by her mother-

⁶⁶ Naming the Hindu family structure “patriarchal” as some feminist scholars have done ignores its inherent complexities such as the authority of mothers-in-law or pressure on Indian men as well as women to marry and produce sons. This does not, I think, take away from the usefulness of “paternalism” as an occasionally applicable and descriptive term.

in-law following the birth of her first child for failing to produce a son; the midwife is told “to bury” the female baby (97). Only her husband’s intervention saves the Younger Wife and their daughter, who is retained as a house servant and told she is an orphan. The disenfranchised girl relies on the benevolence of male members of the household to provide her care. Her desperate situation is akin to the outcaste servant’s, who in “Eve’s Sin,” explored in the next chapter, makes an ambiguous, possibly sexual trade with a young man for an item of clothing. Like Sarah’s possible exchange of her milk or Gaudet’s “gift” of a new robe discussed in chapter one, these examples suggest the necessity for under-the-radar accommodation of servants’ needs.

Being cared for by a man as his “proper” younger wife only nominally improves on the vulnerability of childhood. The protagonist’s delayed marriage—which ensures that she enters her husband’s household last and therefore inferior to his male relatives’ wives—and the servant girl’s lack of recognized parentage positions them both to become literal or figurative “younger wives,” adopted, in a sense, by men who desire them to subserviently fulfill their needs. In the former case, the character transitions from a possibly incestuous relationship in which her father is dominant, to a proper marriage in which she serves her husband and suffers his sexual demands, while the “orphan” girl may be marriageable soon (or raped by her father) and thus poised for a cyclical repetition of her mother’s experience as a less-than-satisfied wife. Though preferable to formal servitude, the protagonist realizes that marriage won’t ensure her estranged daughter’s sensual fulfillment, just as her own marriage leaves her longing with unsatisfied desire.

Though they reside within the same household, the distinction between wives and servants affords the protagonist's relative comfort along with her restricted ability to affect her daughter's condition. She wonders, "which man is feeding her and which one is beating her," and concludes, "Better that a man takes care of her, better than being anybody's helpless child" (98). She imagines that only male intervention, in the form of an interested resident or spouse can provide material support for the girl, initially dismissing her own ability to care for her. Her concern reveals her continued attachment to her estranged daughter and frustration at her limited ability to effect her protection. Moreover, it suggests that no matter how loving her own father was she recognizes her lack of power as his daughter. This realization, I argue, leads to her second conscious manipulation of her husband in regard to his attempt to acquire an additional "younger wife."

Lacking the means to materially protect her, but experienced in the dominant/submissive dynamics of marriage, the Younger Wife offers her daughter what she can, that is, a lesson in self-satisfaction.⁶⁷ In the story's final scene the protagonist contends:

My man wants to make more sons with me. In the nighttime, he asks the orphan girl to massage his back. She cannot stop until he orders it. I sit there and watch. After a while, he turns over on his back and the girl and I see clearly that it is time for my man to do his work. I know that my man

⁶⁷ I credit Martha Selby for aptly describing this dynamic.

will pull the closest one to him, so I push the orphan girl away and open the throat of my womb for his water. (100)⁶⁸

The language shifts throughout the scene with the father of Harinath first “asking,” then “ordering” the girl. She “cannot stop,” nor can her mother risk looking away and miss the opportunity to intercept her husband’s libidinous intentions. The reiteration of the possessive phrase “my man” seems an insistent, if futile, reminder that the narrator’s husband belongs to her. His ability to take “the closest one to him” and her impotence as she sits and watches their daughter massage his back destabilizes the privilege of this possession. The generic term “one” implies that either female will do, against which the protagonist finally acts to restore her primacy as wife. Whether she makes herself available wholly to protect the girl seems doubtful, more likely she desires to be her husband’s sole consort. More importantly, the passage, which ends with the certain prediction that the “orphan” girl “will become a ‘younger wife’ very soon,” allows the protagonist a second opportunity to assert her desire and to temporarily alter her (and by association her daughter’s) destiny. I would add to this reading the possibility that, while not featured in this particular sexual act, the Younger Wife’s lactation gives her a superior appeal over her daughter. Her sole production of breastmilk, which her husband evidently desires, increases her symbolic and material value to him, even if in this instance his need for a female body is nonspecific. His unspecified lust for a woman further demonstrates the elision of wife and servant roles, just as his prior recollection of

⁶⁸ This scene parallels the opening description of the foot massage, in which the protagonist pleasures her husband until his shaking, internal laughter indicates his sexual release. Evidently this daily fulfillment fails to deter his later expectation of intercourse but rather encourages the association between massage and ejaculation.

his mother's breasts while watching his wife nurse suggests an uncomfortable overlap of female roles.

The Younger Wife embraces what little control she has in the situation, first by making her body more readily available to her husband for sex, then by fondling and sucking his toes for her own satisfaction, as is her practice, once he falls asleep. "Drown[ing] in the rosy fragrance" of her husband's feet, she demonstrates for her daughter the secret pleasures she derives from attending to his undeveloped "toe-buds" (100). The girl shows no outward interest in either the sexual activity that takes place before her, nor in the narrow aversion of her involvement in it: "She lies back for now, too lazy to enjoy a man who makes her work." Still, she watches the Younger Wife who observes from the "tightness of her body" that she will soon become a younger wife (100). Her demonstration seems to thus counsel the girl to develop a similar habit of self-satisfaction.

We cannot know whether the father of Harinath specifically desires the girl but his request for a massage, followed by the inevitability of satisfying his arousal, leaves open the possibility that she soon may become sexually involved with him. Although the scene disturbs the reader who reacts with horror to the possibility of incestuous, filial sex, the preceding revelation of the characters' nontraditional, or unknown family relationships as well as the "sameness" of the roles of "servant" and "wife" challenge our immediate response. Though still problematic, we are left wondering how different the sexual abuse of the daughter would be from the protagonist's marriage since the girl is unaware of her parentage, and while her father knows her origins, he has no experience

of being paternal toward her. His literal distancing from her outside of this scene might contribute to his assumption—like the protagonist’s father’s assertion—that she doesn’t need his paternal care. Recalling the collapse of female roles, his latent knowledge of her origins but lived experience of her service may strengthen his sense of ownership over her and the rightness of taking her sexually. Indeed, she is not only his servant but also his daughter—like a younger wife, traditionally his property in every way.

I believe the Younger Wife’s physical intervention in her husband’s sexual claim on their daughter directly challenges his ownership of her. In determining whom he will sexually have, she undermines his authority over the female members of his household (his breast-taking affront to his mother underscores this hierarchy), and thus highlights her agency. It is no less significant that in doing so she sacrifices her personal comfort to postpone her daughter’s experience of painful as well as incestuous intercourse. Kavita Sharma glosses the story differently. She contends: “Abnormal and perverse family relationships in the apparently righteous patriarchal family structure form the theme of ‘Younger Wife.’ The narrator had an incestuous relationship with her father and mentally prepares for a similar relationship between her husband and her daughter.”⁶⁹ I am unconvinced that actual sex takes place between the Younger Wife and her father, though a plausible argument that it does can be made. I take greater issue with Sharma’s description of the “mental preparation” of the protagonist, as it seems to undercut the active role she plays in the above scene. Although I don’t mean to suggest that her intervention permanently staves off what seems to be the inevitable sexualizing of the so-

⁶⁹ Sharma, Kavita. Previously cited.

called orphan girl, when considered alongside the previous demonstration of her subversion, her actions take on a more compellingly powerful tone than Sharma's gloss allows.

Ruth's challenges of her husband occur outside of her breast-giving, too, and intersect with their disparate proprietary views. Denise Heinze argues that the "frenzy for ownership" established in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* "manifests itself in its worst forms in *Song of Solomon*," where it is "countered...by the nonappropriative view of life most often represented by the women" characters (132). Macon is the worst offender, Heinze argues, because he ignores what she calls "the African view of [man's] role as custodian of the land," adopting "the American view of ownership and exploitation" instead (132). As a descendent of slaves, Macon's preoccupation with ownership—well justified by his experience of his father's murder in a standoff for his property—can be traced to his belief that people, too, can be(come) property. In preemptive defense of the possibility of de facto enslavement, i.e., working for someone else, Macon advises his son to "own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55).

The fear of a return to bondage inherent in Macon's words, and their warning drawn from his knowledge of enslavement, underscores the belief that one cannot simultaneously *own* and *be* property. The preoccupation of *Song of Solomon*'s twentieth-century African American male characters with this paradox, and attempts to outrun its ominous threat, are influenced by the legacy of slavery, which permeates the novel's

spiritual undercurrents and Milkman's quest for self-discovery. Macon recognizes the truth in his own family's history and establishes his property-obsessed career around it. His relative success through the Depression and World War II, coupled with the conspicuous consumption of the 1950s, further hone Macon's obsession with property. For instance, "the Dodge sedan" he owns "for Sunday drives only" and never uses for fun, marks his material possessions as primarily status objects (9). Groomed by her father to be similarly motivated by class status if not actual property accumulation, Ruth uses her knowledge of her husband's value system to provoke him.

As a result of her devotion to her father, Ruth develops an obsession for being "among his things, the things he used, had touched" (124). This tactile rather than acquisitive desire contrasts with Macon's persistent efforts to increase his wealth and highlights Ruth's sensuality; her relationship to property is not about amassing material status but rather about satisfying her need for a "bit of balm" each day to survive, a role that breastfeeding her son eventually fulfills. The Doctor's things remind her of the only man to ever care whether she lived or died but challenge her husband's desire for unadulterated patriarchal power. Her father's name has this effect on Macon as well. In 1936, for instance, "Macon Dead's Packard rolled slowly down Not Doctor Street," piloted by Macon on his weekly outing to inspire envy in the community (32). In this sentence, Morrison illustrates the second legacy against which Macon rails: the prominence of his reviled father-in-law posthumously brands the road on which he parades his expensive car. Macon's office is coincidentally also on Not Doctor Street, linking even his means of subsistence with this ghostly legacy. His family's residence

within the Doctor's house further frustrates Macon's social code of property-oriented, male success, and assists Ruth's challenges to his paternalist authority. With communal consensus such as that which names the street, Macon's son receives a nickname that sticks and which marks him as not his father's property, but rather his mother's breastfed son.⁷⁰ Ruth and Macon's antagonism revolves around their battles for their son's possession, which are both assuaged and triggered by Ruth's breast-giving.

Ruth is at once a long-suffering wife of a bitter and abusive husband who never forgives her Electra complex and the self-styled Electra who wields her paternal devotion like a weapon. Ruth's seemingly innocent account of her naïveté during a Catholic communion, punctuated by her proud claim that she "certainly is [her] daddy's daughter," provokes first Macon's verbal, then physical attack (67). This most potent example of Ruth's spoken resistance of Macon's authority seems a flagrant attempt at goading his fury that ties into the emasculating name game described above. Ruth names herself as, like Milkman, independent of Macon's identity; moreover, she affiliates herself with the man he suspects her of loving incestuously. Her declaration therefore capitalizes on her husband's insecurities about her fidelity to him, and interrupts the expected exchange in heterosexual marriage between father and husband. Since she cannot become Macon's property as long as she remains her father's possession, Ruth forecloses their possible unity. Denise Heinze concurs that "If Macon cannot own [Ruth], he will not love her" (83). Ruth seems to suspect this fact and her "guileless inefficiency" at pleasing Macon

⁷⁰ Edith Frampton articulates this comparison as well in her article, "'You just can't fly on off and leave a body': The Intercorporeal Breastfeeding Subject of Toni Morrison's Fiction." See esp. p. 147.

with edible meals makes her ability to “lead [him] down paths from which there was no exit save violence” seem all the more calculated (64). Trapped in an abusive marriage to a man who finds her “disgusting,” she garners control by determining when his violence will occur. Macon predictably responds to Ruth’s claim by hitting her, prompting Milkman’s intervention and the subsequent revelation of his mother’s supposed incestuous past.

Milkman links his father’s property obsession to the shocking revelation that his “mama [might have] screwed her daddy,” leading to thoughts of Macon’s complicity with Ruth’s purported incest. Milkman mentally accuses his father of accepting the trade of his wife had the Doctor paid him off: “If he’d given you those four bankbooks to do what you liked, buy up the Erie Lackawanna Railroad, he could have had her all he liked, right?” (77) This imagined exchange of the means to buy physical property for incestuous sex casts Ruth as a commodity to be bargained between her husband and father in a slight variation of the traditional marriage contract. Rather than purchasing Ruth’s hand for a price, thus earning exclusive sexual rights to her, Milkman imagines Macon’s property-fueled deal to perpetuate the Doctor’s incestuous access to his daughter “without the neighbors knowing it” (77). Ruth, in this imagined scenario, lacks the power to determine her sexual identity or role with either her husband or father. Her determination to maintain her sensual selfhood by reflexively breast-giving back to herself, *for* her self, tacitly reasserts the agency stolen from her in this male-dominated, disempowering fantasy.

Ruth's challenges of other characters extend to women as well. Years after the exposure of her nursing severs her daily contact with her son, Ruth renews her claim on Milkman when his lover/cousin threatens to kill him. Reflecting on the intertwined nature of her sensual self and her child "she saw her son's imminent death as the annihilation of the last occasion she had been made love to" (134). Milkman personifies Ruth's sensuality; she sees his body as her own to touch, play with, and protect, whereas Hagar wants to destroy it out of unrequited love. Self-preservation rather than maternal protectiveness motivates Ruth's possessive passion in her battle with Hagar to lay claim to Milkman's life. Her threat to "tear [Hagar's] throat out" should she harm him is guided thus by more than a motherly desire to defend her son—she wishes to guard a lost episode of her past. Pilate rightly identifies this battle as centered on possession. She berates the "Two growed-up women [for] talkin 'bout a man like he was a house or needed one" (138).

Ruth's singular focus in this confrontation echoes the merciless tenacity she used in "keeping her father alive even past the point where he wanted to be ... until he was too sick to fight her efforts ...[and] linger[ed] in absolute hatred of this woman who would not grant him peace" (134-35). Her refusal to let him go mimics her persistence in keeping her unborn son alive following her orchestration of the event that produced him. Hoping to counter the dryness of nearly fifteen years of marital abstinence with a "bond between herself and Macon, something to hold them together and reinstate their sex lives," Ruth contrives her final pregnancy with her sister-in-law's help (131). Though she credits "sweet, crazy Pilate," for instigating the "single triumph" of Milkman's birth

(implying her ostensible comparative lack of agency), it is Ruth's intense determination to produce evidence of her sensuality that ultimately engenders his conception. Likewise she appeals to Pilate but must also rely on her own strength to maintain her pregnancy once Macon emerges from "his few days of sexual hypnosis in a rage and later ... trie[s] to get her to abort" (131). The birth of their only son then provides their ongoing battle to determine his life course.

As in my analysis of *Property*, in which Manon tries to reclaim possession of her servant by viewing her body as a battlefield to be conquered, to his warring parents Milkman

became a plain on which like the cowboys and Indians in the movies, [Ruth] and her husband fought She was the Indian, of course, and lost her land, her customs, her integrity to the cowboy and became a spread-eagled footstool resigned to her fate and holding fast to tiny irrelevant defiances. (133)

Morrison's intriguing metaphor works on multiple levels. It highlights Macon's hegemonic dominance and recalls Heinze's critique that Macon adopts (white) America's view of ownership and exploitation, which enables the commercializing and commodification of Native American culture. Moreover, by portraying Ruth as the defeated "Indian," Morrison invokes the cultural heritage of both African and Native Americans, whose bodies—like the land of the indigenous Indians—were colonized and enslaved. Because men were part of both victimized groups, the comparison interestingly links Macon with the colonizer/enslaver position. His unquestioned dominance over Ruth

makes her subjugation inevitable unless the reader is alerted to the fallacies of the movie-version's script.

By demoting Native American culture to a mere artifact of its former prodigious existence and supposing that “of course” she will be the conquered Indian, Ruth loses her status as a worthy adversary. Although elsewhere she demonstrates her ability to subvert Macon's power with mentions of her paternal allegiance, the rules of this battle favor Macon as his son's professional mentor in a labor-obsessed society. Finally, the reference to the movies resonates with the performative aspect of Ruth and Macon's relationship. Their fights and predictable explosions of violence seem rehearsed and revolve around Ruth's deceptive passivity. Like the battle-weary Hollywood Indian, she resigns herself to losing each fight. Yet this knowledge of her role seems also empowering; she controls its predictability and therefore never truly loses.

Macon's assumption of power in this fight seems a necessary response to the unwinnable contest Ruth's breast-giving presents and its inadvertent brand of their son. Unable to compete on these terms (lacking the ability to nurse) and unaware of the details of its source, Macon nonetheless suspects “filthy connection[s]” with his son's nickname:

Milkman. It certainly didn't sound like the honest job of a dairyman, or bring to his mind cold bright cans standing on the back porch, glittering like captains on guard. It sounded dirty, intimate, and hot. He knew that wherever the name came from, it had something to do with his wife and

was, like the emotion he always felt when thinking of her, coated with disgust. (15)⁷¹

Adding to Macon's fears is the proverbial suspicion that the milkman might be his wife's on-the-side lover, threatening to usurp his phallogentric rights as husband and father—just as he briefly worries that his father-in-law could have fathered Lena or First Corinthians.

In nursing Milkman past a conventional age Ruth asserts an admittedly limited power, though it is “at least metaphorically, and from her perspective, an act of defiance against” her husband and father's dominance and privileging of “‘white’ hegemonic values—money, ownership, individualism—over the traditional black values [and] ancient properties of traditional black womanhood” (O'Reilly 143, 25). The experience fulfills her but she seems aware of its potential controversy within the context of her assimilated family's culture.⁷² She is therefore secretive about it, stopping once she is discovered. Her adoption of fantasy and averted eyes as she breastfeeds—“not so much from maternal joy,” but to avoid seeing the proximity of her son's feet to the floor—likewise troubles the reading of her confidence in fulfilling her personal need for sensuality in this way. Once Milkman reaches adulthood, Ruth's realization, that he “had never been a person to her, a separate real person.... He had always been a passion,”

⁷¹ Macon's associations of cleanliness with the respectable male-gendered job of milkman unconsciously distance it from the “dirty, intimate, and hot” properties of human female breastmilk. His thoughts echo a widespread preference for the deceptively antiseptic image of pasteurized cow's milk under consideration in this dissertation's introduction.

⁷² Freddie's reference to the Southern practice of later nursing suggests a place apart from white culture that might not sever this connection to African American cultural heritage.

helps explain her use of him and reasserts the sensuality of her breast-giving (131). Nevertheless, critics tend to vilify Ruth's behavior, linking it to "psychological malaise" (O'Reilly 142), or a character weakness caused by her lack of opportunity to "blossom... with her [own] mother's milk."⁷³

Andrea O'Reilly posits, "Western practices of early weaning, coupled with discomfort with close mother-son attachment, particularly if expressed physically, is what render the scene [of Ruth's nursing] unsettling for readers" (143). I agree with her accusation of cultural bias and her claim that Ruth's "Breastfeeding," which I would describe as breast-giving, "also signifies a mother/son bond that stands in opposition to the patriarchal culture and the [maternal] separation it demands" (142). My intervention in this maternally oriented reading underscores how this bond contributes to Ruth's sense of self by enabling her unique relationship with her son. By prolonging this relationship through breast-giving for as long as possible, Ruth is able to insert herself into a paternalist economic lineage that would allow her husband's authority to supplant her possession of her son.

In addition to her nursing, O'Reilly reads two items as important markers of Ruth's resistant subjectivity: her lack of culinary ability—"so integral to the domesticity that defines women's role as both mother and wife"—and the water stain mark on her dining room table that she uses "as a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her.... That she was alive somewhere, inside" (11). These items for O'Reilly

⁷³ See Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems (1990), who attribute Ruth's "psychologically damaged" and "incomplete" nature to her missed experience of being breastfed (qtd. in O'Reilly 79). These types of comments seem to overdetermine the value of maternal contact and leave out alternative sources of Ruth's development.

all “signify a deviation from the script of the good and proper wife/mother that, in turn, implies that Ruth is not a wholly submissive woman” (143-44). I would add to her reading that the water stain left by a bowl used for floral decorations while Ruth was growing up reminds her of Macon’s rejection of her early attempts at cultivating the same bourgeois decorum in their home that she enjoyed during the Doctor’s era. As such, her fixation on it additionally challenges her subjugation as Macon’s wife. Although ostensibly in her husband’s home, the bowl, the table, and indeed the house itself, first belonged to the Doctor, just as Ruth maintains her primary loyalty to her father rather than to her husband. This symbolic claim of property once again undermines the traditional transformation of daughter to wife expected in heterosexual marriage.

Conclusion

Ruth tells her son that she is “a small woman,” but myriad examples challenge the powerless sense of her claim. She makes this statement, for example, by way of explanation to Milkman concerning her regular visits to her father’s grave—in addition to her breast-giving, the second of her two secret indulgences, “the one that doesn’t involve her son”—a journey she regularly makes by foot, bus and train over many miles in the small hours of night. Variouslly described as “insubstantial,” “wan,” and “small,” in her speech to Milkman, Ruth demonstrates quiet inner strength and resourcefulness in the face of a lifetime of disappointment and lack of love.

The Younger Wife, too, ultimately proves herself resourceful and capable of agency, though her short narrative offers limited space in which to substantially develop

her character or to accurately predict the effectiveness of her interventions. Indeed, her desperate actions suggest her long-term inability to control her fate or that of her daughter. The closely connected institutions that restrict her—marriage, maternity, family, and religion—force her to negotiate what she desires: sensual satisfaction and a happy marriage, with what she cannot accommodate: incestuous replacement by her daughter. Thus, she resists in small ways, insistently claiming pleasure in her marriage while using her body to manipulate this evidently unsatisfying relationship.

These conclusions are consistent with this chapter's opening claim that the resistance Ruth and the Younger Wife practice does not initially seem radical. Trapped by marriage rather than official enslavement, neither character risks the literal loss of a child that might motivate Sarah to trade her milk in *Property*. In contrast to what I will call fugitive transgressions in *Beloved* and "Eve's Sin," the inherent risks of breast-giving in *Song* and "Younger Wife" don't threaten the perpetrator's life. Nonetheless, as I've argued throughout the chapter, these quiet reclamations of self may be most effective, particularly in the domestic contexts featured in these texts. Ruth's freedom of movement inside her house, for example, permits her clandestine breast-giving, which in turn allows her to protect this activity longer.

The next chapter's characters are aware of their vulnerability as purchased servants or slaves. They are subjected to caste- and race-slavery, which highlights property in its material aspect. As in Valerie Martin's novel, women in *Beloved* and "Eve's Sin" are considered their owners' property; any challenge of this possession must occur from within their abject status. Because their means of resistance underscores the

characters' enslavement rather than releasing them from it, I argue that it enters them into fugitivity.

Chapter 3

Fugitives Unbound: Breast-giving as Self-Declaration

Toni Morrison's well-known novel *Beloved* (1986) illustrates my argument that by claiming the right to determine how her breastmilk is used, an enslaved woman can refute her status as property and thereby gain autonomy. The fact that her enslavement renders her milk, like the rest of her body, the property of her owner, facilitates this connection and its potential to challenge institutionalized bondage. The risks to the woman who makes such a choice are notable; in the novel, the cost of Sethe's autonomy is considerable. In order to ensure her independence, which is threatened after she claims her milk, Sethe attempts suicide—the only irrevocable means of guaranteeing her self-ownership. In the process, she kills one of her children and instills fear in the other three, leading to her sons' desertion of her and her eventual haunting by her murdered daughter. This second, more dramatic example of Sethe's attempt to own her self garners much greater critical attention than the prior reclamation of her milk. The former act is often only cursorily read as a step along the way to her infanticide.⁷⁴ In this chapter, I argue that it is with this prior act and through Sethe's repeated references to *her* breastmilk (belonging neither to her overseer nor her owner) that her autonomy lies.

Moreover, I believe that reading *Beloved* in this way can assist our understanding of a recent English translation of an Urdu short story, Wajeda Tabassum's "Eve's Sin" (originally "Hawwa ka Gunah," 1977), which features a *dalit* or outcaste woman's

⁷⁴ For instance, Jean Wyatt reports that the discourse surrounding Sethe's "specifically female quest" toward "self-definition" asserts that it is "powered by the desire to get one's milk to one's baby" (475).

“reprehensible” use of her breastmilk to feed an upper-class sick child. This act requires the woman’s belief that her milk is as good as that of her caste superiors; thus in breast-giving, she challenges the social hierarchy of her community.⁷⁵ “Eve’s Sin” tragically concludes with the *dalit* woman’s cruelly disfiguring punishment by her owner’s decree. Yet in imagining the possibility of her protagonist’s challenge, Tabassum critiques the caste system that makes her temporarily empowering and effective breastfeeding a punishable offense. She encourages her readers—and the story’s narrator—to do so as well. Finally, in locating Champa’s agency in breast-giving, Tabassum contributes to the developing body of literature that imagines breastmilk as potentially constitutive of mothers’ radical claims of their selves as well as vital for their children’s health. I claim this body of literature as an archive of cultural documentation of this issue, which is in urgent need of further examination.

This chapter’s use of a canonical Morrison novel to illuminate themes in a South Asian short story resembles the previous chapter’s comparison of *Song of Solomon* with Ginu Kamani’s “Younger Wife.” My decision to repeat the comparative model in this

⁷⁵ The self-chosen term *dalit* defies the institutionalizing of caste status as indicative of innate qualities. It is politically used, like the related term “tribal,” to acknowledge human rights violations that continue unprotected by officially outlawed and socially outmoded reference to Varnashram Dharma, or the Hindu caste system. Women of the *dalit* caste, the so-called “dalits within dalits,” suffer the most extreme violations due to the combination of gender and class discrimination in their communities. See the six *Dalit Black Papers*, published by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), available online at www.dalits.org/Blackpaper.html. On the issue of gender inequality, the NCDHR contends “Dalit women are the most discriminated and exploited persons in a society dominated by caste hierarchy and patriarchy. For them, the intersection of caste and gender means that they are subject to the most extreme forms of violence, discrimination and exploitation, even at the hands of women from upper-castes.” This contention recalls the diverse experience of enslaved and slaveholding American women addressed in my chapter one.

chapter works, I think, due to the broad spectrum of readers already familiar with *Beloved*. The most widely taught of Morrison's novels, its numerous awards, including the Pulitzer in 1988, its popularity with book clubs—not to mention its endorsement by Oprah Winfrey, who co-produced and starred in the unsuccessful 1998 film version—all contribute to the popular status of this novel as “Toni Morrison's finest work” (according to the *Chicago Sun-Times*). Indeed, *Beloved* is invariably invoked whenever I mention the subject of my research. The shocking scene of two “mossy-teethed white boys” taking Sethe's breastmilk in the barn imprints itself on the minds of most readers. I state above what has yet to be done with this novel, namely to give prominence to the complicated representation of breastmilk as property that runs through it. Work by Edith Frampton, Gretchen Michlitsch, Michelle Mock, and Andrea O'Reilly importantly contributes to this conversation, yet none has articulated the significance of Sethe's breast-giving as a means for better understanding her identity as “property” that owns itself.

My analysis thus departs not only from the numerous discussions of *Beloved* as homage to the “sixty million and more” lost in the Middle Passage (the quote is the novel's epigraph), but also from discussions that emphasize haunting, ghosts, “rememories,” or the Bible.⁷⁶ Nor am I solely concerned with the novel's rare representation of the “maternal voice,” or even breastfeeding as illustrative of Sethe's “maternal flow” or the “motherline,” which Hirsch (1989) and O'Reilly (2004) address. Rather, I am interested, as my previous chapters have indicated, in underscoring the link

⁷⁶ Wyatt (1993) and Cullinan (2002) both discuss the intersection of narrative and memory in terms of the maternal voice, while Broad (1994) and others address *Beloved*'s biblical allusions and haunting.

between breastmilk, property and identity, the latter of which is for Sethe primarily maternal. In this chapter, therefore, I focus on the nearly ruinous attempt by the agents of slavery—her overseer, “schoolteacher” (whose name is never capitalized in the book), and his nephews—at robbing Sethe of her maternity. They do so first by forcibly taking her milk, then by trying to return both Sethe and her children to bondage once she has escaped with them.

I am aided in my analysis by studies of slave resistance such as the one by Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein (1981), which lists abstinence and abortion as methods used by enslaved women to subvert their reproductive value to their owners. Slaves also occasionally resorted to infanticide, as Sethe does, which Hine and Wittenstein call “possibly the most psychologically devastating means [for the slave] for undermining the slave system” (294). Such methods, however painful, offered one way for enslaved women to determine their body’s reproduction. By managing their pregnancies, they were able to “own” a part of their bodies that was valued and in this way made inaccessible to slaveholders. The historical account of Margaret Garner’s well-publicized infanticide to prevent her family’s reenslavement gave Morrison inspiration to write *Beloved*, which includes at least two additional references to this precedent. Sethe’s wet-nurse tells her that her mother “threw away” the infants she conceived before Sethe with white men who raped her on the slave ship (62), while the bitter Ella refuses to nurse the product of her years of rape by a white father and son, resulting in that unwanted child’s death (258). This second example, by demonstrating the opposite of what Sethe chooses, comes closest to the way in which she uses her milk to assert her autonomy.

Like Ella, who recognizes that her child will die without her breast, Sethe insists on her right to choose who will or will not receive her milk. For property to make such a choice, I contend, demonstrates resistance to being owned by someone else; it constitutes the enslaved woman's claim of autonomy. Recognizing that her claim will not be acknowledged within the bounds of enslavement, Sethe becomes a fugitive. She escapes to the North and refuses, once discovered there, to ever return to her former bonds.

The resistant behavior illustrated in "Eve's Sin" is less dramatic than Sethe's public declarations of self-ownership, yet it nonetheless demonstrates its protagonist's defiant agency in breast-giving across caste. Champa is not purchased to breastfeed. Her responsibilities include menial labor: tending to livestock and washing the soiled diapers of her employer's sick infant grandson, whom she eventually surreptitiously nurses. The replacement or augmentation of Champa's duties with one she is forbidden to perform for fear of her outcaste milk contaminating the wealthy child, elicits my interpretation of her autonomous claim and its apposite parallel with Sethe's. Champa determines that her milk may be used in a way that ultimately restores the boy's health. Instead of limiting her utility to what her owner proscribes, she resists the passivity of her status as property and indirectly proves her worth. In doing so, she claims possession of her body and the milk it can produce, which more appropriately maximizes her potential. Although her caste status differs importantly from that of a slave—not the least by rendering her nearly worthless, a distinction I explore more thoroughly below, I argue that, like Sethe's, Champa's breast-giving initiates her fugitive status by upsetting notions of property, and can therefore be elucidated by this comparative reading.

Scholars and lay readers alike typically identify Sethe's attempted murder of her children and herself and successful infanticide of one daughter as the most powerful rejection of her enslavement rather than her response to the rape in the barn that precedes it. In denying schoolteacher the right to her children through murder or its attempt, Sethe claims them as her own, thereby behaving not as property but as a person with the authority to desire, resist, and choose. Hine and Wittenstein call the murder of one's child "the ultimate statement, with the exception of suicide, of opposition to both sexual and economic exploitation which was available to the slave" (294). Writing about "the limitations of citizenship and property in the American public sphere," Dara Byrne makes a similar argument regarding the liberating prospect of death for slaves in *Beloved*, which I outline in some detail below. Although they also mean tragic loss for the slave, these murders of self and children destroy their owners' property and confer at least temporary agency on the person who commits them.

These murderous means of resistance are indeed engaging and have yielded much fascinating scholarship since Hine and Wittenstein first called for it in 1981, pre-dating *Beloved*'s publication by six years; I propose, however, that additional, less obvious mechanisms of subversion employed by enslaved women require academic scrutiny as well. My contribution to the many varied analyses of *Beloved* seeks to draw attention to these other moments of resistance and expand the existing discourse surrounding Sethe's behavior. Specifically, I draw on the model of "fugitivity" introduced in Samira

Kawash's article "Fugitive Properties" (1999), to suggest that Sethe's claim of her milk and subsequent escape from Sweet Home pose significant challenges to her "sexual and economic exploitation" prior to her unforgettably powerful statement in the storehouse with a handsaw.

I accompany this reading with a text new to English readers by way of Karline McLain's recent translation of "Eve's Sin." McLain's analysis and careful rendering of this story by the prolific and controversial Tabassum first introduced it in conference form to American audiences in 2002; there is no other translation or criticism written on it in English. The brief (six-page) and shocking narrative demonstrates another case of a purchased woman making a radical statement by using her milk to feed a child though she is forbidden to do so. (In *Beloved*, her children's fugitive status once they escape from slavery also makes Sethe's nursing of them punishable by law.) Like the biblical Eve, Champa defies patriarchal authority that determines her outcaste status and restricts her interpersonal behaviors; she is restricted from even holding the boy whose life she eventually saves with her milk. Her subversive breastfeeding across caste exposes the fallacy of this arbitrary hierarchy, which would allow the baby to die rather than be nursed by a low-caste woman. We are encouraged to conclude, as Champa does, that like children, "Mothers, too, are equal" (McLain 67). This bold claim and the action that follows it—nursing in secret to restore the sick child's health—challenges the concept of "untouchability" and perpetuates Champa's fugitive status, which begins when she first embraces the baby and ends with her eviction from the community (McLain compares Champa's forced exile to Eve's expulsion from Eden, 60). The discovery of Champa's

actions results in what effectively kills her although not before her vocal defense and indictment of the community's hypocrisy.

As in my analysis of *Beloved*, in which I emphasize Sethe's claim of her milk over her more dramatic infanticide, I argue that a prior act of transgression in "Eve's Sin" foreshadows Champa's clandestine breastfeeding and thus deserves critical attention. Champa makes a trade with a high-caste young man in the household where she works to acquire money to buy clothes that her master doesn't provide. This unspecified transaction has shades of prostitution left unconfirmed by the text. It nonetheless indicates Champa's resourcefulness while showing the limits of her economic efficacy as an outcaste woman. Moreover, in bending the restrictions of her status as slave to orchestrate an exchange for her own comfort, she behaves not as property but as a person.⁷⁷ Her transgression at this stage therefore confirms her fugitive status.

Both "Eve's Sin" and *Beloved* were written in the latter half of the twentieth century by women authors who are well known in their countries of origin; Tabassum's penchant for criticizing the social norms of her culture in her fiction has, in fact, made her infamous. These texts, furthermore, similarly engage issues of power, gender, and sexual violence that surround the central dynamics of claiming selfhood through possession of breastmilk. By studying their depictions of breast-giving transgressions, subversions and challenges of the hierarchies of caste- and race-slavery, we may better understand the

⁷⁷ Champa's caste status and purchase ensure that she works without wages. I recognize the distinctions between this type of enslavement and that of antebellum America to which Sethe is subjected. One important difference is the relative lack of value Champa symbolizes to her owner versus the high price of a sexually reproductive, "breeding" woman like Sethe.

economic relationships of these systems and the function that breastfeeding plays in each of them. Disparate as they and their conditions may be, the protagonists of both texts offer models of breastfeeding while in bondage that denaturalize the activity and force us to question the significance of nursing children that are not technically one's own. In Sethe's case, her children as slaves are neither hers to nurse without permission nor to protect from sale; simply by escaping to bring them "their milk," Sethe becomes a fugitive and may be multiply thought of as such for "stealing" her children, her self, and the substance that fuels them both. Champa's initial act of nursing another woman's child is unconscious though her suspicion of maternal equality guides her, as does her emotional attachment to the boy. Her transgressive "fugitivity" begins when she repeatedly ignores admonitions against touching him and, in making a trade, engages in economic activity as an agent rather than passive property to be exchanged by others.

I intend this chapter's definition of fugitive acts and its unusual pairing of texts to draw out previously unrealized readings of *Beloved* and initiate discourse on "Eve's Sin." Doing so, I believe, will demonstrate the exigency of new interpretations of breastfeeding, which include transgressions of status and identity, and will offer a potential methodology for these analyses. I begin with a review of Samira Kawash's argument regarding fugitivity and the enslaved body, which establishes my model of reading the transgressive or subversive actions of the bonded characters. This is followed by my analysis of each character's breast-giving and additional transgressive activities relative to their unique cultural contexts. For example, the transmission of bodily fluids in "Eve's Sin" must be read in regard to notions of pure/impure diets and behavior, and fear

of pollution across caste. Sethe's behavior, too, specifically responds to her body's perceived value within the institution of American slavery. Despite their marked cultural differences, which extend beyond the examples given here, I argue that both characters contain elements of the economic and sexual oppression endemic to female enslavement. I therefore integrate relevant details about the disparate systems of caste hierarchy and racial bondage throughout the chapter in order to provide contextual specificity, even as I demonstrate what makes their comparative study so compelling.

Fugitivity, Breast-giving, and the Limits of Resistance

When Sethe, an enslaved woman living in Reconstruction-era America, and Champa, an outcaste Hindu woman purchased to work for a Muslim judge in colonial India, reclaim or acknowledge ownership of their breastmilk for the first time, they challenge their respective social hierarchies and their status as property. The costs are dear in each case—one woman loses her breasts, the other her child—which underscores two of Samira Kawash's points regarding fugitivity; that is, its relative success as a means of resistance and the violence of restoring order that it necessitates. Fugitivity, as Kawash defines it, exists outside the categories of "property" and "person" that slavery regards as discrete. This distinction opposes the "modern idea [that] property and the ... subject are indissociable," or what Locke and Hegel call the "natural right" of the political and social subject to interact in the world (Kawash 277). In brief, Kawash argues that the institution of slavery attempts to undermine the personhood of bonded people, making them wholly their owners' property and thus "subject to [their] will" (277). Those who invest in human chattel must therefore vigilantly suppress any recognition in their

property of their subjectivity or “property-in-person” that would accord their right to self-ownership.

Describing the binary positions of master or slave, Kawash explains that “the system of property demands that one maintain an unambiguous relation to its law of divisions, wholly on one side or the other,” i.e., propertied or property (278). Sethe and Champa transgress the boundaries separating these spaces, becoming fugitives not by officially owning property (or by purchasing themselves from their masters as Kawash writes of Frederick Douglass), but by *behaving* as if they are propertied subjects whose “property” is located in their bodies. Each character takes definitive action that suggests she has the right to decide her own fate and by extension, the fate of what her body produces, be it her children or her breastmilk.

As an escaped slave, Sethe’s fugitive identity is explicit, while Champa enters fugitivity more indirectly. In breastfeeding an upper-caste child, with whom she is forbidden contact, she resists the constraints of her “untouchable” servant position and proves the equality of her milk. Additionally, both characters challenge the conventions of their cultural economies by *giving* their breastmilk away rather than allowing their owners to determine or contain its use. Choosing to whom they will give their milk requires economic agency and importantly asserts their (temporary) autonomy. (As I mention above Champa does this through a material transaction involving money for clothing as well.) Since only persons and not property can engage in exchange relations, in doing so they defy their assigned subjugation and insist on their selfhood.

Kawash develops the notion of the fugitive as a “power[ful] figure [that] counter[s] the logic of master and slave,” but acknowledges that there are limitations to this figure’s efficacy that make their acts of escape less than “triumphant” (279). In her analysis of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for example, she concludes that Harriet Jacobs’s “loophole of retreat,” while providing her a temporary escape from discovery and return to active slavery, was not in fact a “triumph” since Jacobs remained, in effect, a non-entity while in a state of fugitivity (287). In her essay, which addresses slave narratives and their contemporary responses, Kawash describes the abolitionist outrage at Frederick Douglass’s concession to being viewed as property when he allowed his freedom to be purchased from his legal owner. This act, which enabled Douglass to live without risk of reenslavement such as Sethe fears (the Fugitive Slave Law allowed slaveholders to recapture their lost property), also importantly changed his status from fugitive to person (278). Harryette Mullen makes the similar point that Harriet Jacobs’s status remained that of “a fugitive slave until her freedom [was] purchased by her Northern mistress” (265). These transactions indicate the extensive power of property law vis-à-vis fugitivity in that neither escaping to the North nor literary fame guarantees the former slaves’ autonomy.

Kawash compares the formality of Douglass’s purchase with the fascinating “popular expression among slaves for escape[:] ‘stealing oneself,’” which complicates the discrete categories of property and person and allows what Kawash calls “a strange transitivity” to occur between the people who abscond and their affinity with what they steal (279). As simultaneously object and agent in this action, the escaping slave assumes

a middle category of fugitivity, straddling property and personhood and embodying elements of both. I add breast-giving to this oddly transitive relationship between the slave and her body to emphasize its requirement of agency on the enslaved woman's part. My use of the term is meant to underscore the active transfer I believe takes place in determining the use of one's milk. That is, I contend that the breast-giving characters acknowledge their milk as a type of property—often due to its contested possession—and therefore deliberately give or trade it as a commodity whose ownership they have assumed.

Naming breast-giving a fugitive act, I believe, benefits from the social and philosophical categories that Kawash so illuminatingly describes. Her method provides a useful tool for reading texts in which the protagonists embody the liminal space of fugitivity, becoming neither wholly free nor completely conceding to the subservience of their status as slaves. Because breast-giving inhabits a unique position in the range of transgressive acts, appearing more often as a naturalized behavior rather than as a potentially subversive one, it is important to understand how performing it may alter a woman's status.

Due to its status as a democratic means of sustaining life available to women of all social levels, breastfeeding threatens traditional power structures. In *Beloved* and "Eve's Sin," where otherwise disempowered women have the ability to breastfeed and may do so outside the boundaries of institutional control, this threat seems even greater. Writing about breastfeeding in *Beloved*, Michele Mock articulates this danger: "When value is placed upon an object and the marginalized deemed powerless within the

hierarchy own such an object—they become newly empowered and no longer marginal, thereby upsetting the established *status quo*” (121-22). Although my reading of the two texts shows that this upset is only temporary, the characters’ insurgent behavior allows them to briefly challenge the bonds of their oppression: Sethe’s milk is the veritable fuel that propels her past otherwise insurmountable impediments on her route to Ohio, while Champa’s transgressive nursing proves her maternal vigilance and equality.

The perception of their breastfeeding as resistant to institutional hierarchies, however, causes these acts to expose the protagonists to danger and reveal the dual vulnerability and power enabled by breast-giving. Ultimately, both stories illustrate Kawash’s assertion that retaining or controlling the fugitive body necessitates violence, which draws attention to the limits of what this body can accomplish. Locating the fugitive’s power in her breasts, moreover, proves risky given their physical vulnerability. Both Sethe and Champa’s experiences of violence directed at them through their breasts confirm this argument.

Beloved

Michele Mock describes the central imposition on enslaved women’s maternal bonding as a problem of ownership. She contends that “[a] slave cannot own—not her mother and not her child” (118). Sethe’s illusory belief that her children are in fact *hers* stems from her atypical access to them at Sweet Home, a small plantation on which she is allowed to be near her young children during the course of her day’s work. In contrast, her mother-in-law loses all eight of her children to the slave trade and can only remember

obscure details about a few. Sethe's own mother was allowed just "a week or two" of nursing before being sent back to fieldwork after which Sethe was breastfed by Nan, the plantation wet-nurse "whose job it was" but whose breast "never had enough for all" (60, 203). Sethe explains that "all the little whitebabies" were fed first while she was entitled to whatever milk, if any, was left. This insufficiency and what Sethe missed of her own mother's care poignantly symbolized as lost breastmilk, leads to her definition of good mothering as "having milk enough for all." The precedent of wet-nursing also establishes the exchange of babies necessitated by "the mammy" role which "regularly required [her] to nurse white babies in addition to, and often instead of, her own children," resulting in their malnourishment or even death (Hine and Wittenstein 290). Sethe's commitment to providing milk for her children takes on powerful significance in this context; she doesn't fight merely to nurse them but to determine their continued survival, which translates into their ownership. That is, she refuses to recognize her children (or herself) as property and submit their possession to slaveholders who might abuse and separate them from her maternal care.

Sethe realizes because of her childhood experience with her mother and Nan that the right to nurse her children is not inevitably hers just because she produces "their" milk. The narrative arc of the novel follows her journey to reclaim this stolen right. Mock writes of her personal discovery as a breastfeeding mother that "to produce [breast]milk is to therefore own it—it is yours to give" (119). Though her sense of ownership replicates Sethe's, who rightly feels that her milk is stolen by boys who had no right to it, Mock's identity as a person differs from Sethe's as property and allows her confident

sense of possession.⁷⁸ Setting aside the additional distinction—that Mock is a living critic while Sethe is a fictional character—within *Beloved*, breastmilk ultimately doesn't distinguish itself from any other fruits of slave labor, that is, its production does not guarantee possession; hence Sethe's distance from her mother and Baby Suggs' stereotypical separation from her children. The theft of Sethe's milk further proves the fallacy of Mock's claim. Although Sethe considers this milk as her own to give, her sense of ownership threatens slavery's hierarchical structure by suggesting her subjectivity instead of confirming her enslavement; it cannot therefore remain unchallenged. Mock accedes that Sethe's "breasts signify a power that can be too easily snatched away," which becomes the violation meant to confirm her status as property (121).

Like many other scholars, Dara Byrne locates Sethe's shift in autonomy at the point of noticing schoolteacher's arrival in Ohio and subsequent infanticide, after which she intends to die by her own hand. She writes, "Sethe nullifies her commodity value and claims her autonomy, just as Sixo had, by choosing death over enslavement" (34). I argue, however, that before Sethe makes this desire known in the storehouse she expresses it in running away from Sweet Home on a mission to reach her children with their milk; this action establishes her fugitive status.

Byrne writes a complex analysis of *Beloved*'s social potential using Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere. Her application of this concept offers rare commentary on how notions of property function in Morrison's text. Our starting

⁷⁸ Sethe describes her assailants as both "men" and "boys" over the course of the novel (6, 70); their age is not determinable. Although I use the more common appellation of "boys" in the chapter, it is not meant to imply childish ignorance about the abuse they commit.

interpretations of the way in which slaves resist the theft of their selfhood is similar, yet Byrne arrives at alternative conclusions, asserting that death is the ultimate means by which human property resists its bonds. She writes, “By exercising sovereignty of self and revoking the imposition of Western economic classifications on the body, death enables the slave to shift the locus of power away from the master” (25). Linking the denial of property rights to African Americans in the late nineteenth century, with their consequent absence from both public and private spheres, Byrne concludes that “Death [for the slave] becomes a calculated political action [which] denies the supremacy of the nineteenth-century American public sphere” (26). The agency required of suicide, therefore, marks this as both a subversive and political act that allows the bonded person to defy the Law’s “agency and authority in defining that particular individual as moveable property” (Byrne 26).

Byrne compares Sethe’s and Sixo’s defiant gestures toward schoolteacher that result in de facto suicide missions for each. I draw attention to her reading not to refute her premise of the liberatory possibilities of voluntary death within slavery or her fascinating use of separate sphere theory to explicate the importance of community development among post-Reconstruction African Americans. Rather I draw on her argument to look beyond Sethe’s powerful decision to commit infanticide and suicide in order to escape slavery to the prior act of claiming her milk as likewise defiant.

Byrne incorporates Franz Fanon’s assertion of desire as the means of forcing a master to recognize his slave’s humaneness. Fanon writes:

As soon as I desire I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world—that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions. (qtd. in Byrne 31)

Byrne relates Fanon's "asking to be considered" to Sethe's claim of her children's lives and Sixo's desire for a life other than one of slavery indicated by his defiant laughter and singing his way to death. In effecting their murder, Byrne avers, "Sethe takes ownership of her children, they become her property because they are the 'life she had made'" (33). Thus Sethe enters Fanon's world of reciprocal recognitions when she begins to reject her internal brand of enslavement and acknowledge her right to live with, feed and keep her children, which schoolteacher threatens. His nephews' theft of her milk is the impetus for her changed perspective from property to person or from enslaved to master of her self.

Byrne reminds us that, in asking their owners' permission to marry, Sethe and Halle "not only depend on authorization for their marriage, they are also acknowledging that any children produced from their marriage would eventually contribute surplus labour to Sweet Home" (44). This example demonstrates the characters' internalized enslavement at this point. Although the death of Mr. Garner and deterioration of her mistress's health signal changes on the plantation to which Sethe is attuned, her violation in the barn and subsequent whipping for informing Mrs. Garner of it provokes her recognition of and resistance to her status as property. Prior to this point Sethe and Halle

talk of buying their freedom; “running was nowhere on [their] minds” (Byrne 197). They are not yet able to consider themselves on the other side of the master/slave dichotomy and thus can only imagine purchasing (not stealing) themselves. Their transition from slavery to freedom depends on their internal liberation, not just removal from plantation life. “Running” or escape implies cheating the economic system that brands some people property and others people. Before she is attacked in the barn Sethe doesn’t challenge this logic.

Schoolteacher’s experiments with the Sweet Home slaves underscore their status as property as opposed to “men” as Mr. Garner perceived them (*Beloved* 10). His lessons exemplify his view of them as chattel, a distinction made explicit in his nephews’ list of Sethe’s “human” versus “animal” characteristics. This inhuman perception of enslaved people common in the antebellum period enabled their mistreatment and abuse. Treating Sethe’s body like an animal’s—or “worse,” as Sethe contends—recalls a contemporary saying from the Indian region of Uttar Pradesh, documented by anthropologist Leela Dube, which contends that an untouchable woman may be milked “like a she-goat” at any time. These similar ideologies, used to sexually abuse and exploit enslaved and “untouchable” women, prove that radically disparate cultural foundations of hierarchical power structures may produce like perceptions of their subjugated members.

These dehumanizing assessments of human property or so-called untouchables also suggest the immense difficulty of embodying an autonomous subject position while in bondage since the hierarchies in which these abuses occur are institutionally protected. Schoolteacher instructs his nephews to view Sethe as bestial, which directly precipitates

their violence against her. He observes their theft of Sethe's milk with his notebook in hand, "watching and writing it up," thereby formally encouraging her violation (70). Sethe's subsequent resistance in desiring, then acting upon her choice to live away from this mistreatment, echoes Fanon's request "to be considered"; it is her refusal to no longer be a "thing" that removes her from schoolteacher's categorization and abuse and confers her fugitive status. Underscoring the importance of self-ownership and the extension of it to include one's children, Sethe relates with pride how she protects "the best part of herself," her children, from schoolteacher's notebook and "measuring string," his tools of dehumanization, through organizing their escape (198). She commits to this transgression once she realizes her ability to protect them while enslaved is ultimately untenable.

Sethe's language as she recounts the theft of her milk to Paul D suggests the importance of claiming it, too, as her own. "I had milk," she tells him, "I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar" to join their grandmother in Ohio (16). She continues:

Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if

she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. (16)

Her repetition emphasizes her sole ownership of maternal knowledge, along with the physical possession of her milk. These items are unique to Sethe and encourage her sense of urgency about reuniting with her child. Paul D concurs with the observation that “a suckling can’t be away from its mother for long” (16). Although this fact inspires Sethe’s journey toward freedom, the subsequent theft of her milk reinforces her sense of ownership over it and dedication to protect her children from suffering a similar fate.

Sethe tells Paul D that before she could escape, “those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it” (16). When they find out Sethe has disclosed their violation to Mrs. Garner, one of the boys whips her until her back “open[s] up,” ultimately developing scars like a tree (17). Paul D’s incredulous response to learning that Sethe was whipped counters her repeated indignation that her milk was stolen; from her perspective, this violation exceeds all others.

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you was [nine months] pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (17)

Sethe’s later revelation that a hole was first dug to protect her unborn baby during the whipping illustrates the arbitrary abuse and protection of (human) property. According to

the unspoken code of slavery, she can be raped and beaten as long as her reproductive ability remains intact.

Her stolen milk leads to Sethe's resolve to protect her children, particularly her daughters, from slavery at all cost. She escapes from Sweet Home and becomes a fugitive fueled by the commitment to bring *her* milk to *her* children. Her determination to provide for her children involves more than making sure they are properly fed; her breastmilk—and ability to deliver it to whom and when she pleases—symbolizes an ownership of self only achievable through escape, i.e., by “stealing” the self that would be otherwise claimed by schoolteacher's twisted authority. Sethe tells her daughter, “only me had your milk, and God do what He would, I was going to get it to you” (198). Tragically, Sethe's fleeting sense of freedom ends when she murders her infant daughter and attempts to kill all four of her children and herself to prevent their return to Sweet Home.⁷⁹

The Fugitive Slave Act gave slaveholders the right to recapture runaways, ensuring that persons could be considered property even outside the geographic boundaries of so-called slave states, hence one meaning of their fugitive status; schoolteacher therefore arrives in Ohio intent on reclaiming his stolen possessions. Upon witnessing the chilling tableau of Sethe and her apparently murdered children, however, he concludes that there is “nothing” for him to collect, underscoring the non-entity Sethe becomes as a fugitive and secures when she answers the violence of potential

⁷⁹ Sethe's incarceration for this crime raises another intriguing inconsistency of slave laws, which acknowledged the personhood of resistant fugitives in order to detain them, though in other civilian instances, such as voting or land ownership, they remained property.

reenslavement with a radical violence of her own. Ironically, in rejecting the “thingness” of slave identity she literally becomes—like Jacobs in her hiding place—neither a subject, nor a thing (Kawash 285).

By determining her children’s fate, Sethe defies the boundaries of property law to become an agent in an economy where people’s lives can be exchanged and sold. Unwilling to be further manipulated as chattel or to have her children taken from her, she gives what is in her power to effect, e.g., death, with the same determination with which she gave her children life and later her breastmilk.⁸⁰ This irrevocable act exemplifies Sethe’s determination to remain united with her children despite all institutional attempts to impede her efforts. Significantly, Baby Suggs is able to retrieve Sethe’s dead child from her only by reminding the shell-shocked mother, “‘It’s time to nurse your youngest.’” Since Sethe then refuses to be separated from another child in order to clean herself up, “Denver took her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister,” after which Sethe continues to nurse her for the three months she is in jail (152).

Sethe’s tenacious commitment to providing her children with “milk enough” or putting them “out of harm’s way,” comes at what is arguably too great a cost. Although she removes her family from future enslavement by Southern whites, her infanticide instigates their captivity by the ghost of the murdered baby. Rather than losing her children to slaveholders, Sethe comes close to losing her mind to the all-consuming power of motherlove on which many critics, including Morrison herself, have

⁸⁰ Sethe delivers her youngest child while in a near-death state following her brutal whipping and escape.

commented.⁸¹ Her murder prevents Beloved's reenslavement but ultimately traps Sethe with the guilt of having ended her child's life too soon. The murdered daughter returns and nearly drains Sethe dry of mental and material resources that fail to placate her voracious and insatiable hunger. The almost fatal result of Sethe's need to appease Beloved illustrates the danger of linking her survival to the fulfillment of her children's needs—a debilitating economy, particularly when one child can never have milk enough. While Sethe's attachment to her children attempts to make up for a truncated relationship with her own mother, Beloved represents a composite of characters, including the "Sixty Million and more" that died in the Middle Passage; she can never therefore, be reciprocated for her loss.

"Eve's Sin"

The laws that regulate human property in the context of American slavery vastly differ from those that comprise the cultural backdrop of "Eve's Sin." Nevertheless, the hierarchical structure depicted in this story shares elements of the prototypical antebellum household, including gendered subcategories that police behavior and determine indiscretions. Overarching these at times unclear conventions are the dual forces of Islamic governance and the caste system's codes of conduct. These multiple influences

⁸¹ See Andrea O'Reilly's positive interpretation of motherlove in *Beloved*, which she reads as the motivating factor of what I have been calling Sethe's fugitive behavior. Most intriguingly, O'Reilly aligns Sethe's behavior with Harriet Jacobs' commitment to free herself and her children. *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, see especially, p. 130-33.

on honor and piety—two values introduced early in the narrative—must be understood in order to fully appreciate the “transgressions” of which Champa is accused.

Karline McLain, author of the only published English translation of “Eve’s Sin,” states that “many” of Wajeda Tabassum’s stories are “critical of the nawabi aristocracy of Hyderabad,” which was removed by the Indian government’s “police action” in 1948 (59). Tabassum was a teenager living in Hyderabad at this time and she reflects on the power of the still-effective nawabi rule in “Eve’s Sin.” In this story’s context of the mid-twentieth century in one of the domains of the last Nizam (Mir Osman Ali Khan), the rights of all citizens are governed and accorded by a colonially appointed judge. This judge, who is the narrator’s great-great-grandfather, receives his power from the British government that bestows property on him in the form of land and villages “whenever they were happy” (62). We recognize the irony of these “gifts”—provided as they are by invaders of the nation then redistributed to native Indians whom the government appoints—and question the reliability of the unnamed teenaged narrator who naively claims “these British rulers were good” because of their ostensible generosity. She ignores the colonial mediation of the judge’s power, a key factor that attentive readers cannot overlook. Indeed, she concludes that since “all the villages *belong* to [him],” her grandfather “alone was the government” (62, emphasis added).

By foregrounding the story with the exchange of property for power at a national level and allowing this particular narrator to describe its events, Tabassum establishes the multivalent hierarchies that ensure Champa’s marginal subject position as an outcaste *dalit* woman. While we cannot forget that all the featured characters live under colonial

rule, within this rubric lie tertiary means of establishing human value and social power—means that typically divide along a public/private split that the nature of Champa’s “sin” elides. The judge, to whom the narrator refers as “Grandpa Jan” while all others call him “Master” in deference to his authority, is “a very good ruler...quite a pious man [who] helped the poor a lot, and if he saw that someone was negligent of religion, then he would have their ears pulled” (62). Although Islamic law theoretically supercedes the power of any mortal decision and endorses sympathy “towards the poor” (who, according to the narrator “should also be considered human beings”), Master Jan interprets the spirit of “*Jahangir’s* [Mughal] justice” in his court and is unchallenged there. Within the home, Jan’s female family members assume arbitration duties. His wife, for instance, views Champa’s employment as a moral threat, while the female narrator repeatedly promises to reveal Champa’s transgressions to her grandparents. Gender hierarchies within the home, as well as caste, contribute to the value of infants, wives, and servants and determine how each one is treated. (The judge and his family are caste Muslim, meaning observant of caste distinctions, while Champa is an outcaste Hindu.)

In the opening scene, Master Jan purchases Champa from her father to work as a servant in his palatial home. This transaction frames the story, as does the so-called “bell of justice” that signals the sessions of the judge’s court. McLain observes that the bell changes from symbolizing justice to the narrator at the start of the story to her “corrupted” notion of the judge’s “fairness and piety” when it marks Champa’s punishment at the end (McLain 60). From the story’s beginning, Champa’s outcaste status is immediately apparent. During the transaction that confirms her sale, her father

“stand[s] there helplessly with his head bowed” while the judge insults him and argues Champa’s price, underscoring her status as property and the *Camars*’ inability to defend themselves before the Law.⁸²

In contrast to her father’s ineffectualness, the narrator perceives that Champa seduces the judge with “sparkling and consuming glances,” which “thoroughly stunned” him. She equates Champa’s nominal power with sexual temptation—a mark of low caste women likely projected onto her with little evidence. This tacit persuasion contrasts with the pious encouragement of Master Jan’s sons, who urge him to pay Champa’s thirty rupee cost by “put[ting] the fear of God into him” (62). Their repeated references to Champa’s *dalit* caste and “ill-behavior,” however, indicate that she is hardly worth this paltry amount. Their comments, too, collapse Champa’s sexuality and her caste, aided by the stigma of young widowhood, which contributes to her diminished value. As once-married women, Indian widows, particularly when young, are considered sexually potent and therefore prone to negatively influencing other women in their midst. They are thought to require observation to prevent them from inevitable prostitution or corruption of their community. Champa is triply marked with inauspiciousness as a widow, an outcaste, and the mother of a dead child. Her father’s desire to be rid of her suspiciously responds to this triple threat to his own reputation.

Writing about caste-observant family relationships and their affect on girls, Leela Dube observes, “A daughter’s reputation is predicated upon the constraints which bind her movements”; these constraints, she adds, rely on her parents’ intervention (17).

⁸² *Camar* is an untouchable Muslim caste appended to the characters’ first names. *Dalit*, a self-chosen term, also indicates outcaste status.

Indeed, Raghu *Camar* ostensibly sells his daughter to Master Jan because of financial hardship caused by the village famine, but his concern that it is not “the right thing” for “a young girl” and “widow” to join him instead in the city, calls up gender specific associations between corruption, caste and his daughter’s marriageable status. Master Jan reluctantly agrees to the sale while voicing the risk to his house’s purity posed by the degrading presence of an outcaste widow. This condemnation of Champa before the fact of her transgressions indicates the power of her reputation to convict her without evidence. Although her breast-giving is revealed by the story’s end, her guilt seems foretold in the opening pages.

Grandma Jan’s extreme response to the news of Champa’s entry into her home draws attention to the sexual nature of her perceived threat. She “pitched a powerful fit...saying, ‘I’ll never let this happen, not in a thousand years! Such a ripe young girl, such a good-looking little tramp!’” (63). Master Jan’s solution to his wife’s objection is to exclude Champa from “the business of the house,” effectively nullifying her humanity by revoking the possibility that she might participate in the domestic economy. As Jan “gently” puts it, “She can stay over in the servants’ quarters. Whether she lives or dies, what’s the difference?” (63-64). His comment illuminates a key distinction between caste indenture and property-focused American slavery. In the latter case, every lost slave life constitutes lost property, i.e., wealth. A dead female slave of breeding age could cripple a small plantation since her body represented investment in future generations. In contrast, Champa’s insignificant purchase cost accords her very little of Jan’s attention; “whether she lives or dies” means next to nothing to him in monetary terms.

Champa's exclusion from "the business of the house," moreover, mandates her clandestine negotiations for goods not otherwise provided her. Once again highlighting her supposed sexual nature, the narrator reports a trade Champa makes with a young male family member a few weeks after her arrival, which arouses her suspicion of illicit dealings:

With my own eyes I clearly saw her emerging from the water buffaloes' barn, and behind her Phupha Uncle also emerged. Mother had taught us well that we shouldn't speak to boys alone. It's bad behavior. So then why was Champa in the dark barn with Phupha Uncle? I asked her: "What kind of behavior is this, Champa?" (64)

Like her grandmother, the narrator assumes the role of moral police by questioning Champa's transaction. Her suspicion of what Champa might have been doing, stemming from "stories that [the narrator] had read secretly in Mamu Uncle's room," assigns a lascivious tenor to whatever she replies. The comment from Uttar Pradesh permitting their sexual abuse at any time articulates the perception of outcaste women's bodies as sexually accessible, which helps explain the young narrator's suspicion and may provoke her uncles' enthusiastic endorsement of Champa's purchase. Like the myth of African women's hyper-sexuality used to justify their sexual and economic exploitation by slaveholders, the myths about outcaste women reveal more about their perceivers than the women themselves. The upper-caste narrator's reference to the stories she reads in secret, for instance, suggests her sexual curiosity and that of her uncle who owns them.

The narrator, though Champa's same age, alternately reprimands her behavior and marvels at its audaciousness. These characters' pairing presents two ends of the spectrum of female conduct and the allure of an "othered" woman for a sheltered girl. The narrator describes herself as "too clever for my own good.... Like Columbus with his determination to discover a new world, I was similarly bent on discovering new things" (63). Her metaphor increases the sense of distance between Champa and herself, marking the outcaste woman as an exotic conquest to be taught appropriate female behavior. Likewise, it hints at the narrator's desire for the sexual knowledge she assumes Champa has.⁸³

What Champa actually provides in the barn appears to be Phupha Uncle's masochistic pleasure in the form of "a slap" in exchange for clothing money, a possibly sexual, definitively subversive economic transaction.⁸⁴ Justifying this exchange to the incredulous narrator with a pragmatic assessment of her status in the home, "[Champa] said plainly, 'Master doesn't pay any attention to my clothes. The young master heard about this somehow and came to give me some money himself'" (65). Champa's explanation parallels her resourcefulness with her master's poor appreciation of his property. Her presumption in entering into a contract with a superior class member—negotiating a trade of goods for services within the household that owns all her labor—challenges the authority of the judge and expectations of property. It initiates, to quote Fanon, the anti-enslavement concept of "reciprocal recognition" or exchange.

⁸³ Karline McLain offers the possibility that the title's reference to Eve describes the narrator's "loss of innocence as she is brought into the world of adult knowledge" (60).

⁸⁴ The original Urdu word translated here as "a slap," is ambiguous per Karline McLain, interviewed by the author in March 2003.

In this scenario Champa essentially behaves as a free agent. She refuses to stay within the bounds of the outcaste servant's expected servility by passively accepting her status as a possession (akin to Fanon's "thingness"). Instead, she claims agency by negotiating a trade, explaining to the narrator who questions why she provides the requested service, "Well, what can you get for free in this world?" (65). In doing so, she demonstrates a clear understanding of economic reciprocation. Her recognition and desire of what she needs—in this case clothing not provided by her master—leads her outside traditional channels of acquisition. The incident, while not formally connected by the narrator to Champa's subsequent secret breastfeeding, seems relevant to our reception of that event. Both cases involve Champa's pragmatic consideration of facts: in the first, she needs (or desires) better clothing and finds a source to provide it in exchange for an easy service; in the second, the need lies with a hungry child who seeks the nourishment of her milk. Champa rationalizes both actions using reason and choice, faculties typically denied in slaves.

As an untouchable, Champa is allowed only to perform the polluting tasks for which she was hired, like washing the diapers of the upper-caste newborn, *Nannhe Miyan* (little sir), who falls ill as a result of being fed animal milk when his mother ceases to lactate. The baby reminds Champa of her own son, who died in infancy of pneumonia. Much to the narrator's frustration, Champa ignores explicit orders not to touch *Nannhe Miyan*, spending any "spare time to herself...playing with" him (64). Ultimately Champa envisions a potentially delusional exchange of infants in what seems an attempt to deal with the trauma of losing her son. According to the narrator, she begins to "lov[e] the

child uncontrollably,” and “happily” insists, “This is my Rajjan” (65). When the child’s health deteriorates, Champa inquires about the possibility of hiring a wet-nurse without suggesting herself as a candidate. The child’s nanny rebukes this suggestion, fearing “the consequence...of [ingesting] *certain* women’s milk” (66, emphasis added). She implies that a wet-nurse would be a low-caste woman whose milk might corrupt the character of the child, just as Champa is feared for her ability to morally poison her community. This representation of wet-nurses dramatically differs from Mahasweta Devi’s “Breast-Giver,” which I address in the next chapter. There, the wet-nurse is a Brahman, the highest caste level in Hinduism; her milk is thus considered elevating and auspicious for those who drink it. The nanny’s rejection of cross-nursing echoes Grandma Jan’s fear of Champa having “some negative impact on the children”; the narrator observes that “The truth, however, was that it wasn’t the children but the elders of our household that received the negative impact” (63). Their children’s protection provides the adults’ excuse for their prejudices born of caste distinctions.

As an outcaste servant—a purchased piece of property, thus effectively, like Sethe, a slave—Champa lacks the power to change the social systems to which the judge’s household rigidly adheres. Nor can she approach anyone else in the community for help, since her *dalit* status and suspect reputation as a young widow condemn her. Indeed, because of these things and the early death of her son, Champa is viewed as a pariah. Before entering his household as his servant, she is brought to Jan’s court on “several” occasions for “wander[ing] the streets staring at the young children” and on suspicion of “roaming around looking for her deceased ones,” her dead husband and child

(63). While never supported by actual harm, Champa's threat to children finds grounds in Sanskrit mythology regarding the Brahmanic demoness "Childsnatcher," considered the culprit of children's deaths.

Dominik Wujastyk glosses this myth from the fragmentary archive of Kasyapa's *Compendium*, which includes detailed descriptions of the nature of Childsnatcher and how to avoid her.⁸⁵ Its warnings clearly reflect social prejudices, while its guidelines for contact with foreign, unfamiliar or otherwise suspicious people help maintain expectations of acceptable female behavior (Wujastyk 214-15). The *Compendium* considers especially vulnerable women who are "pregnant for the first time" and who come "into contact with *people whose children have died*, or with other women friends who are *unclean, impure, bad, who are not accepted by society, or who have been caught by Childsnatcher*," a list that damns both the potential victim and those who can corrupt her (220, my emphasis). Each italicized phrase defines community perception of Champa. Indeed, although her son's death from pneumonia might be more accurately attributed to his family's low caste status, economic position, and attendant vulnerability to disease, Champa's intrinsic "impurity" as an untouchable woman makes her a prime target for childsnatching and a likely conduit of the demoness's attention; she is thus feared for endangering the children (and mothers) in her midst. Myths like that of Childsnatcher, and more importantly their social impetus, live on past the usage of the *Compendium*. Though not explicitly mentioned in "Eve's Sin," their cultural impact contributes to assessments of Champa's imagined power. She is feared because her

⁸⁵ Wujastyk, Dominik, *The Roots of Ayurveda: Selections from Sanskrit Medical Writings*. The Childsnatcher myth is discussed on pp. 210-38.

intentions are unknown and it is believed that her body harbors the means for acute contamination. Champa's breastmilk is therefore particularly reviled as an intimate and suspicious substance from her ignominiously marked body.⁸⁶

The literature on caste and diet does not describe breastmilk as a food, but its caste associations are irrefutable. Echoing Martha Ann Selby's analysis of hot and cool foods and their gender associations, M. N. Srinivas stresses the need to "look...at the hoary institution of caste from the point of view of women" who most often suffer the acute effects of caste-inflected concepts of "purity-impurity" (ix). Srinivas also contends that "Women are more directly concerned [and associated] with [caste pollution] than men," while Leela Dube describes the hierarchical classification of "intrinsic[ally]" pure versus polluting substances, emphasizing the gravity of eating the so-called appropriate diet for one's caste. Dube concludes that "food[s] then are substances which carry the capacity to affect and transform the person who consumes them" (7). It follows that the transmission of an untouchable woman's breastmilk to an upper-caste infant is based on fear of actual bodily transformation. Ironically, "Eve's Sin" documents the reverse effect with the mutilation of the breastfeeding woman's transgressive body rather than *Nannhe Miyan's*.

Aware that he won't be offered a wet-nurse but that the doctor's methods are failing, Champa maintains her vigilance by the sick infant's side and only out of default fills in when the nanny tires of his cries. Despite her previous admonitions about their contact, the narrator unknowingly engenders Champa's transgression, handing the baby

⁸⁶ This is the inverse of praise for revered bodies and their substances such as I discuss in the previous chapter's explanation of the foot worshipping scenes.

to her when she, too, wearies of his wails. In sleep-talking reverie Champa considers the harm of “other wom[e]n’s milk.” She concludes that “Children are all equal. Mothers, too, are equal,” and allows the child to suckle when he discovers her breast, which surprisingly produces milk a year after her son’s death (67). Following ten days of secretly nursing *Nannhe Miyan* back to health, Champa’s transgression is discovered when the baby’s cries cause her milk to flow in public. When she admits she has breastfed the child, Master Jan immediately orders the village butcher to “cut off” her breasts. This violent mutilation as a result of unregulated breastfeeding exposes the community’s fear of pollution and resonates with Samira Kawash’s claim that “The fugitive body exposes, in fact embodies, the violence necessary to preserve order, hierarchy, boundedness, propriety, and property.”

Although Kawash was writing about events described in slave narratives, Champa’s outcaste status renders her a similarly liminal, if not fugitive figure, whose actions confront and refute the boundaries imposed by caste hierarchy. She refuses to be contained in the “boundedness” mandated by caste or patriarchal law that repeatedly discounts her value and ability to operate as a thinking and desiring subject. Her musings express the hypocrisy of valuing all children as equal but dismissing some women as less worthy than others. Her subsequent breast-giving—so-called for its deliberate purpose of saving the boy’s life as distinct from the initial action meant to calm him to sleep—and the infant’s recovery of health prove her instincts correct.

Champa’s last words to the court offer fodder for community consideration of the extremity of her punishment. Confronted by “the whole household...in an uproar,”

Champa defends her actions, explaining: “I couldn’t stand to watch him crying. He seemed just like my own son, I swear by God. Well, why else would the Lord give milk to a woman? For the child, right? So how could I just watch him cry?” (68). Her invocation of the Lord hints that divine intervention may have caused her milk to once again flow. This puts her nursing in an unusual category of resistant behavior since it seems almost miraculously guided. Tabassum “maintain[s] that her writing is so powerful because a religious force inspires her”; she believes that the unity of women “from all segments of society” can “alter the patriarchal structures that are present in their daily lives” (McLain 61). Champa’s gift of her breasts to the child and later sacrifice to the butcher’s blade illustrate her symbolic contribution to Tabassum’s cause. Like the author, she is bidden to transgress in the course of true justice; that is, the recognition of all women’s equality. As a result of her controversial subject matter, McLain notes that Tabassum’s work has been “criticized, spoken about dismissively, and even censored” among Urdu audiences (61). Champa moves outside the bounds of caste distinctions that undermine her stolen subjectivity through several transactions like nursing, touching, and making an exchange. These transgressions, particularly when accompanied by her dually pragmatic and divine justifications force communal acknowledgement even as they incite brutal retribution. Although she doesn’t successfully alter her own caste status or predicament within the narrative, Champa leaves her audience with compelling rhetorical questions.

Of course we can’t celebrate Champa’s transgression as an uncompromised success since the story concludes with her mutilation and likely death; to do so would

commit the error of forced “emancipatory” reading I caution against in this dissertation’s introduction.⁸⁷ Yet the effect of Champa’s call to her community supports Karline McLain’s contention that the power of “Eve’s Sin” lies in the narrator’s concluding disillusionment, which suggests that Champa’s transgression—a “sin” committed like Eve’s within a patriarchal context—exposes the fallacy of Master Jan’s uncontested rule. Indeed, the narrator moderates her praise of him in the final account of his ruling, illustrating a loss of his judiciousness: “Grandpa Jan arrived with due pomp and graced his royal chair with his dignified presence. He was *trembling* with anger over [the infraction with the child]. He was *foaming at the mouth*. *With a roar*, he said to the secretary: ‘Summon Kallu the butcher’” (68-9, my emphasis). This schizophrenic description, ranging from stately composure to animalistic rage, suggests, to paraphrase Kawash, the anxiety surrounding the preservation of order, and the narrator’s discomfort with the judge’s decree. The latter reading opens possibilities for guarded celebratory interpretation of “Eve’s Sin.” Though she introduces Jan as “a very good ruler...quite a pious man,” the unusual circumstances of Champa’s transgressions of the Law, not to mention Jan’s brutal retribution, cast the narrator’s definitions of justice and piety into doubt. Moreover, recognizing the irony of the situation—that the baby will likely die

⁸⁷ Samira Kawash quotes Carla Kaplan’s related caution regarding overly emancipatory interpretations of Harriet Jacobs’s narrative. She writes: “Jacobs is at great pains to dramatize Brent’s *inability* to ‘subvert’ her status, ‘assault’ her master’s domination, wage ‘effective’ combat, or ‘reverse’ the power structures which bind her. This is the lived meaning of slavery for Linda Brent. It is this narrative’s strongest indictment” (qtd. in Kawash 283, original emphasis). Likewise, to ignore or underestimate the intractability of their bonds would seem to commit a second injustice to the women represented in “Eve’s Sin” or *Beloved*. Like Jacobs, Morrison and Tabassum attempt to accurately describe the oppressive systems that affect lived experience rather than depict overly vindicating or optimistic alterations in their characters’ lives.

without Champa's milk—the narrator is left questioning her grandfather's judgment and possibly the veracity of caste distinctions. The power of Champa's breast-giving therefore, which in this, as in other ways, parallels the sin of the biblical Eve, lies in its legacy of interpretation.

Conclusion

The seemingly disparate texts of "Eve's Sin" and *Beloved* illuminate the experiences of dispossessed women. Although they also reify some restrictive maternal conventions like the privileging of children's needs over mothers' personal safety, they demonstrate the insurgent potential of breastfeeding vis-à-vis repressive institutions, which classify people as propertied or property, masters or servants. Both cultures from which these texts come, moreover, consider wet-nursing to be a function of property, a duty someone can be purchased to perform, reifying the sexual and economic nexus of servant-caste and slave women's exploitation and denaturalizing breastfeeding as an inherent maternal right.⁸⁸ In *Beloved's* context of American slavery, nursing is used to perpetuate the institution, fortifying future workers and enriching the health of the owners' children.⁸⁹ Whereas slaveholding American Southerners asserted that character traits were determined at conception, allowing them to ignore the hypocrisy of using wet-nurses they dehumanized to feed their children, in "Eve's Sin," the anxiety regarding

⁸⁸ Again I refer specifically to the context of "Eve's Sin," which opposes the venerated view of wet-nursing in "Breast-Giver."

⁸⁹ Antebellum historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese describes rare instances of white plantation mistresses who, motivated by investment concerns, nursed enslaved children (cited in Golden 1996: 73).

bodily fluids and their caste-specific purity is obvious. This distinction between the cultural contexts of “Eve’s Sin” and *Beloved* warrants further discussion outside the scope of this chapter.

Although Champa voices a generally held truth, that “children are all equal,” her experience proves its fallacy. Her son dies, likely for lack of material resources to save him. Ironically, in the case of the upper-caste *Nannhe Miyhan*, whose family can afford the best medical care, their fear of potential moral contaminants effectively ensures his death. The inverted parallels between characters across texts are likewise intriguing. Sethe’s monetary value as a breeding slave far outweighs Champa’s worth as an outcaste servant; Champa, however, is allowed to “own” her child, whereas Sethe must effectively steal this right. In both cases their outcaste servant or enslaved status restricts the women’s autonomy and ignores the possibility of their desire. Thus, when the protagonists use their breastmilk or make a trade they do so knowing it counters the sanctioned limits on their behavior. Their knowledge of their transgressions and claim of authority nevertheless demonstrates their desire to possess themselves. The autonomy made possible through breast-giving, in turn, determines their self-possession.

It is important to note that despite my emphasis on the resistant aspects of Sethe and Champa’s actions, neither character is able to dismantle the structures that oppress her. Instead they each enact their challenges from positions of enslavement that continue to bind them throughout their narratives, hence the usefulness of the term fugitivity. That said, I believe these representations of breast-giving succeed in challenging expectations of what the characters can accomplish, albeit temporarily, in terms of their gender and

enslaved identities, even if they are unable to wholly alter their status from property to person.

In *Beloved* and “Eve’s Sin,” breastfeeding one’s own children or their ostensible incarnations is a privilege that accompanies autonomous subjectivity, the claiming of which empowers maternal characters but requires their dangerous transgression of social and legal boundaries. The protagonists claim their rights, including the right to breastfeed, due to their self-identification as mothers (e.g., people, not property) despite social institutions that deny their selfhood. Their insistence on nursing consequently endangers the characters’ personal safety, though it allows their brief and significant defiance. By illustrating indelible links among breastfeeding, vulnerability, ownership, and power, these texts expand the boundaries of fictional representations of breastfeeding and provide literary precedence for lactating women’s resistance.

Chapter 4
“Chief fruitful woman”: Fluid Demise of the Venerated Milk-Mother

*Whether her family is poor or wealthy, whatever her caste, class or region, whether she is a fresh young bride or exhausted by many pregnancies and infancies already, an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can.*⁹⁰

This final chapter combines elements of the aforementioned examples of subversive breast-giving in marriage or in race- or caste-slavery, which challenges power structures and signifies the autonomy of otherwise subjugated characters. It juxtaposes the covert element of these instances with a case of culturally acceptable, celebrated breastfeeding for trade that underscores this activity's material value. Mahasweta Devi's short story "Breast-Giver" (originally published in Bengali as "*Stanadayini*," 1980)⁹¹ features a proud wet-nurse, a "professional mother" who is honored for her maternal abundance but who eventually dies bereft of those whom she reared on her milk. My analysis of this story qualifies the positive outcome of breast-giving that previous chapters develop by demonstrating the danger of giving too much.

The embodied profession of wet-nursing in "Breast-Giver" highlights the dual maternal experiences of empowerment and vulnerability, which are aided by the Hindu Indian context of the story. The Great Mother Goddess governs female identity; her legendary abundance and sacrifices, for instance, encourage mortal women's self-abnegation. Devotion toward this figure preoccupies nearly all the characters, irrespective

⁹⁰ Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1981), p. 56.

⁹¹ Translated as "Breast-Giver" (Mahasweta Devi 1987) by Gayatri Spivak in *Breast Stories* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1997): 39-75.

of their gender, who variously believe in her beneficence or capitalize on her mythical power to effect their personal or economic ends. “Breast-Giver” expands the notion of property to include spiritual possession, in the sense of having properties of the Goddess, while also illustrating class distinctions that enable some women to employ wet-nurses while others must adopt this profession; both parties recognize breastmilk as a saleable product.

In its depiction of so-called professional motherhood, “Breast-Giver” illustrates an important cultural distinction from *Beloved*, Toni Morrison’s nineteenth-century based American novel featured in the previous chapter. Sethe, the novel’s protagonist, resists having her breastmilk treated as if it is available for the taking like that of her enslaved childhood wet-nurse. In contrast due to cultural celebration of the Goddess as Mother in “Breast-Giver,” a devout Hindu woman may adopt professional breastfeeding with pride and use her maternal fecundity in order to achieve greater status in her community—even if the idealization of her role and the fallacy of this belief system ultimately destroy her.

“Breast-Giver” is an important and well-known critique of India’s national discourse on motherhood. Its English translation has appeared in numerous anthologies available to popular as well as academic audiences, the latter most notably in Norton’s *Anthology of World Masterpieces*.⁹² Distinct from the two other South Asian short stories of this dissertation because of its likely appearance in the mainstream “World Literature” classroom, “Breast-Giver” provides an obvious site for the study of breastfeeding that

⁹² Along with numerous other locations, “Breast-Giver” also appears in Susan Thames and Marin Gazzaniga’s popular collection, *The Breast: An Anthology* (New York: Global City Press, 1995).

complicates notions of maternity and work as discrete. Its deceptively accessible status also makes it vulnerable to the entwined dangers of gross generalization and cursory analysis risked by any seemingly representative cultural text. Superficial readers can mistake its description of Hindu devotion, nationalism, or the caste system as simple justification for Indian women's subordination and overlook certain female characters' complicity in their economic privilege. Moreover, they may be confused or even angry about what they gloss as the protagonist's non-altruistic profession. For example, in response to reading "Breast-Giver" for the first time, a former student of mine exclaimed, "She [the protagonist] shouldn't get paid for breastfeeding! It's just something mothers do." This statement was followed by energetic agreement from much of the class. This fairly typical response interestingly avoids some of the common pitfalls of first-time exposure to Indian literature. Instead of orientalizing the character's mystic maternal abilities, my student lumped the Hindu wet-nurse in with universal "mothers," problematically reiterating the normative sentimental claim that breast-feeding can't, or rather *shouldn't*, be paid work, and should remain separate from economic transactions.

"Breast-Giver" reveals the dangers of this fallacious claim. Its subtle castigation of maternalism helps expose the myth that women may be wholly fulfilled by giving of their bodies and should never seek remuneration for mothering deeds. A valuable educational entrée into transnational feminism and its economic resonance, the story examines topics such as the worth of female labor, by representing disparities between the characters of the wet nurse and the women who are financially able to employ her; these disparities yield broad literal and allegorical discoveries relevant to their author's

political interests. As both fiction writer and journalist, Mahasweta Devi, known simply as Devi (meaning “Goddess,” the most general name for feminine divinity and an honorific title akin to “madam”) among the tribal communities she represents in her political and literary work, has been active in the fight for labor rights and social and political reform in Bengal for over five decades. In addition to her numerous Bengali-language short stories and nearly one hundred novels, Mahasweta has edited the grassroots tribal quarterly, “*Bortika*,” submits regular public commentary to journals such as the *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Frontier*, and currently edits “Budhan: The Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group Newsletter.”⁹³ She has also won the prestigious Padmashree, Sahitya, Jnanpith and (the Asian equivalent of the Nobel prize) Magasaysay awards, the money from which she donates to tribal communities. Despite her well-earned prestige and professional success, Mahasweta’s Marxist affiliations remain prevalent in her life’s work and writing on empowerment of the underclass and marginalized tribal peoples of India.⁹⁴ Although her passion for human rights is apparent and frequently expressed by garrulous narrators in her fiction, Mahasweta’s literary commentary on such issues is neither didactic nor simplistic.

⁹³ I mention the political resonance of the self-denoting term “Tribal” in the previous chapter. Biographical information taken from the opening comments of the Seagull series, *The Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi* (1997), and the “Biography of Mahasweta Devi” available from the English Department website at Emory University, <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Devi.html>. 24 Sept. 2005.

⁹⁴ Cf. “Mother of 1084,” in *Five Plays*, trans. by Shamik Bandyopadhyay (Seagull, 1986), “Of Women, Outcasts, Peasants, and Rebels,” trans. by Kalpana Bardhan (University of California, 1990), and “Draupadi,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Routledge: New York, 1987). See also “Mahasweta Devi: Witness, Advocate, Writer,” a documentary directed by Shashwati Talukdar (2001), featuring Mahasweta reading from her work and speaking about her social and political activism.

In “Breast-Giver,” for example, Mahasweta exposes the common elision of capitalism and patriarchal oppression to demonstrate how relatively oppressed people, such as women, can contribute to the exploitation of others. The narrator emphasizes and indicts the various benefits enjoyed by members of a household according to their class privilege and relationship to employment (as either employer or employed). Mahasweta, via this narrator, seems to question the utility of Western feminism in mid to late twentieth-century socioeconomic relations in India.⁹⁵ Feminism alone is not seen as damaging to the story’s characters; blind or superficial religious devotion, capitalism, and the caste system are all likewise challenged. Ultimately, the uncritical adoption of any ideology—including nationalist allegiance to Mother India—comes under attack by the sharp-witted narrator. We sense that the community’s uncritical expectation of maternal sacrifice punishes its most faithful women adherents.

There are at least two significant metaphors at work in “Breast-Giver.” The first, explored at length below, is the protagonist’s experience of the pressure on women to mother by traditional dictate, which in her case exceeds the norm; the second is the allegorical woman-as-Mother-India elision, which like the first, refers to Hindu ideology and perceptions of divine maternal force but may have nationalist applications as well. Looking more closely at the national allegory, which is, according to Gayatri Spivak (1988), Mahasweta’s preferred interpretation of her text, we can see that the protagonist’s experience is not merely an individual case, nor is it confined to a human scope. Her

⁹⁵ For more on the various feminist analyses of “Breast-Giver” and their shortcomings, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Breast-Giver: For Author, Reader, Teacher, Subaltern, Historian...” in *Breast Stories*, previously cited.

tragic death, interpreted in the story as “the death of God,” broadly represents the demise of Mother India and her ungrateful inhabitants.

Bharat Mata: Failure of the Maternal National Allegory

Mahasweta describes “Breast-Giver” as an allegory of Mother India “after decolonization,” employing the common trope that projects maternal characteristics onto the country to encourage national allegiance.⁹⁶ The personification of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) was also used in pre-Independent India as a rallying image designed to incite resistance to colonial British oppression. Jashoda’s draining relationships with her employers, husband, children, and community thus metaphorically represent a misuse of the nation’s resources, which provide its people with their health and prosperity. The story is a critique of hegemonic caste, gender, and exchange relations that persist beyond the expected liberation from their influence following India’s independence from British rule. Although the characters are explicitly caste-Hindu, Mahasweta’s “Mother India” conceives of the nation as a whole, and exposes the stakes of simultaneously honoring and taking advantage of the ability of mothers to give. This allegory becomes particularly insidious when combined with goddess worship that seems to honor but actually oppresses women under what Gayatri Spivak calls “the burden of the immense expectations that such [ideology] permits” (“For Author” 79).

⁹⁶ Mahasweta conceived of post-Independence India as a “mother-for-hire” whose citizens “are sworn to protect the new state” but instead, “abuse and exploit her.” Cf. Gayatri Spivak, “A literary representation of the subaltern: A woman’s text from the Third World.” In *In Other Worlds: Essays in cultural politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 244.

Spivak argues that Mahasweta's allegorical reading of "Breast-Giver" must be carefully nuanced if not "set aside," so that distinct class participation, specifically subaltern experience of nationalist ideology, "can emerge" (80). Her emphasis of this point is twofold: first, by privileging an interpretation of "Breast-Giver" that recognizes only nationalism as a path of resistance, Spivak argues that myriad alternative means of "changing the geo-political conjuncture from territorial imperialism to neo-colonialism" will go overlooked, especially those means historically practiced by subaltern individuals and groups; second, the type of nationalism used to resist "the culture of imperialism" may contain "distortions in the ideals of a national culture [which] when imported into a colonial theater would go unnoticed" (80). This is a particularly germane danger for a text like "Breast-Giver" that is widely read outside India's borders and may be considered representative of Hindu, if not Indian, ideology by those unfamiliar with South Asia's diverse literature and culture. The pedagogical danger of overprivileging a nationalist reading of the text seems one of Spivak's chief concerns, indicated by her essay's title "'Breast-Giver': For Author, Reader, Teacher, Subaltern, Historian..." (first published in 1987, in *In Other Worlds*). In this essay, she advises potential instructors on how to teach the text, warning against the pitfalls of uncritically accepting its author's own interpretation.

Spivak's anti-nationalist argument alerts us to the kind of unifying symbolism of *Bharat Mata* employed during the late 1980s and early 1990s by the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (VHP) or World Hindu Council. In her article "*Bharat Mata*: Mother India and Her Militant Matriots," Lise McKean points out the dangers in the use of Mother India as

a unifying figure by this contemporary Hindu nationalist movement. The VHP, she contends, discredits the diverse range of Indian citizens' experiences to serve its political ends, in the name of serving one "Mother."⁹⁷ Her warnings echo Spivak's condemnation of the collapse of class identities necessitated by the post-Independence nationalist project. McKean likewise highlights "the complementarities between nationalist discourse and the cultural identity of the middle class under British rule," a relationship also emphasized by historian Partha Chatterjee (251). She adds that "Work by feminists demonstrates how nationalist discourse during British rule and later in the postcolonial nation-state, articulated the 'woman question' in terms of the requirements of changing cultural and economic practices of the upper and middle classes," which aptly describes the context of "Breast-Giver" and substantiates my interpretation of it as a feminist economic literary critique (251). Like Spivak's ultimate dismissal of reading "Breast-Giver" as a national allegory, McKean's analysis helps elucidate the failure of national discourse to recognize the role of subaltern identity in effecting female experience. It seems useful, nonetheless, to briefly investigate what Mahasweta's interpretation might allow.

The allegorical comparison of Jashoda and Mother India's simultaneous demise suggests that relative justice is served by the non-reciprocal depletion of the Mother's resources; that is, those who take from her and don't give back lose her symbolic but vital nurturing presence as well as her actual nourishment. This environmental commentary on

⁹⁷ McKean, Lise. "Bharat Mata: Mother India and Her Militant Matriots," *Devi: Goddesses of India*. Hawley, John Stratton and Donna Marie Wulff, eds. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996): 250-280.

the abuse of Mother Earth has obvious global implications. More specific to my economic analysis, Jashoda's struggle as a poor but high-caste Brahmin woman caught in the sea change from feudal patronage to post-Independence capitalism offers her limited options to effect shifts in property ownership or financial independence for herself or her family. Her navigation of professional motherhood within the "changing cultural and economic practices" of her community illustrates how "Breast-Giver" may yield both unique commentary on "the woman question," and provide a capstone example of this dissertation's notions of breastfeeding, gender, and economic autonomy.

"Breast-Giver" chronicles the life and eventual death of a "professional mother" Jashoda (named after Yasoda, the foster mother of the Hindu god Krishna), who becomes the wet nurse of a wealthy Bengali family during the latter half of the twentieth century in urban Calcutta. By way of introduction to Jashoda, we learn that she "doesn't remember at all when there was no child in her womb" (Spivak 39). Maternity seems intrinsically and perpetually part of her history, which is characterized by a lack of "time to calculate if she could or could not bear motherhood. Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings" (39). Jashoda's acceptance of this identity, her self-avowed affinity for mothering and evident maternal abundance—her breasts are described as ever flowing with milk—serves to naturalize her role as the Haldar family's "milk-mother," a job that she holds for most of her adult life.

Jashoda nurses fifty children, and becomes pregnant twenty times over the course of a quarter century. She models what can be considered “maternal excess,” the phrase psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar uses to describe extreme “manifestations” of Hindu “motherliness” (79). The narrator wryly observes that “motherhood is a great addiction” (61). Used in this sense, the term “addiction” invokes the compelling allure of the power and fame that Jashoda temporarily enjoys as “Chief Fruitful Woman,” the auspicious living symbol of goddess-like nurturing in her community. It also foreshadows a tragic result of falling prey to this allure while acknowledging that resistance to it may be futile in a culture that deifies maternity. Indeed, after working for nearly thirty years as a kind of mystical beast of fecundity (she is compared to an auspicious cow), Jashoda’s body begins to deteriorate like an addict’s suffering from withdrawal. At age fifty-five, alone and in horrific pain, she succumbs to a putrefying death from breast cancer.

Jashoda’s death is made more pathetic by the seemingly random twist of fate that initiates her employment. She is hired as a result of an accident in which the Haldars’ capricious youngest son drives a Studebaker over the legs of Kangalicharan, Jashoda’s husband, leaving him permanently crippled and unable to support his wife and their three children. The insinuation of distinct class and caste status is not incidental; the Haldars can afford a new, top quality foreign automobile, while the higher-caste Brahmin “Kangali” walks the streets in relative poverty. Kangali and Jashoda rent their home on the Haldars’ land in the last stages of mid-century colonial feudalism; “Haldarbabu” and

his wife are their “master” and “mistress.” To appease his own Kayastha⁹⁸ family’s karmic debt at nearly killing a Brahmin, the devout Haldar patriarch generously takes care of his maligned tenants, sending them food and offering Kangali a spot on his porch from which to sell sweets to visitors to the adjacent temple. Kangali evidently never pursues this opportunity for minimal self-support, relying instead on Mr. Haldar’s charity and ultimately his own wife’s income.

Sources of wealth and property issues dominate the narrative, particularly in its early section. In the story’s first two-and-a-half pages there are eight references to either ownership or theft. The narrator claims that “The world belongs to the professional,” but lists an unusual triumvirate of “beggar-pickpocket-hooker” that inhabits this world, underscored by the fact that “the mongrel on the path or side-walk, the greedy crow at the garbage don’t make room for the upstart amateur” (40). These cautionary examples of Calcutta’s urban professionals set the tone for unconventional if not illicit means of procuring property that key characters of the story adopt. For example, the Haldar son who runs over Kangali’s legs has “sudden desire[s]” that must be “satisfied...instantly,” provoking his thievery and sexual deviance (40). In addition to “borrowing” his brother-in-law’s car without permission, these impulsive “whim[s]” prompt him to attack the slothful house cook, whose own “body was heavy with ... stolen fishheads,” making her a passive recipient of the boy’s sexual assault (40). Fearful that his indiscretion will be discovered, “the thief thinks of the loot” and frames the cook with the theft of his

⁹⁸ The next caste below Brahmin in northern India, comprised of administrators and educators.

mother's jewelry, which he himself steals. On another occasion he "lift[s] the radio set from his father's room and s[ells] it" (40-41).

Nor is Kangali the Brahmin morally exempt from such chicanery. He brings home stolen food from the sweet shop where he works for his children to eat, which he claims "makes life easier" (41). Ownership thus seems a matter of opinion, open to interpretation by the crafty thief or streetwise professional. Only the euphemistic description of the Haldar household's outdated reproductive practice of "tak[ing] your wife by the astrological almanac" cautions against the capricious obtainment of what one desires (41).⁹⁹ This reference to "sixteenth century" codes of conduct that govern the Haldar patriarch, but not necessarily his descendants, presages their erosion in subsequent generations. In the passage from feudal devotion to opportunistic modernity lies the novel concept of the "professional," with its presumptuous connotations and impact on gendered labor. When Haldarbabu dies, his wife takes over the household, which no longer provides handouts to Kangali and his family. Jashoda pursues a job cooking for the Haldars, but the new matriarch entreats her instead to nurse her finicky grandson, whose mother is sick. Admiring Jashoda's impressive "mammary projections" and attributing them to a divine source, the Mistress concludes: "The good lord sent you down as the legendary Cow of Fulfillment. Pull the teat and milk flows!" (49-50). Thus commences Jashoda's career.

⁹⁹ I resist reading the phrase "to take one's wife" as another example of presumptuous attainment given its translation from Bengali, which may not share the coincidental meaning.

Once the milk stops flowing, some thirty years hence, Jashoda's once famous, now "aging, milkless, capacious breasts" lose their value and "break[...] in pain"; "her usefulness [ends] not only in the Haldar house but also for Kangali," who begins an affair during his wife's long tenure at her master's house (59).¹⁰⁰ Jashoda's worth as a woman is dependent on her "good fortune," comprised by "her ability to bear [and nurse] children. All this misfortune happened to her as soon as that vanished" (62); her fate represents one conclusion to the self-sacrificing life pattern initiated by Hindu myth. As a worst-case scenario, "Breast-Giver" combines an amalgam of traditional female roles within a single figure who is first venerated for her mythic-level abilities to provide maternal substance, then discarded once she fails to produce its anticipated abundance. If Jashoda is a mother addicted to maternity, characterized in part by not knowing when to stop giving, this identity condemns her to a premature and painful death of self-abnegation. Ultimately, she is literally sucked dry and dies.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ From a psychoanalytic and social perspective, it is worth noting Kangali's affair with the young niece of a corrupt temple priest, which nullifies his sexual need for the aging Jashoda. Although not precisely the cross-generational usurpation of the role of intimate companion and caregiver that passes according to Hindu tradition from a son's mother to his wife, in some ways this relationship—due to the elision of female identities—mimics the replacement of older "mother" by younger "wife."

¹⁰¹ Jashoda's death recalls the Hindu myth of the demonic goddess, Putana, who—disguised as his long-lost and beautiful mother—nurses the baby Krishna with poisoned nipples, intending to kill him for a jealous king. Krishna's powerful suckling instead renders Putana powerless. She dies, and in death reverts to her original form. Despite her malignant intent, for her briefly maternal relationship with the god, she finds spiritual salvation in death. For more on the psychoanalytic interpretation of this myth, see Kakar 1981, esp. 146-47.

Goddess Worship & Remuneration: Repaying the Mother's Gifts

The Mistress Haldar's reference to the magical granter of wishes in Hindu legend, or "heavenly cow Surabhi who gives an eternal fountain of milk," is also present in the iconography of goddesses who are frequently depicted holding a jug of milk in one hand to symbolize their nurturing maternal ability (Kakar 84). Moreover, such references connect Jashoda with her mythical namesake and set up her propensity for forgiveness, which becomes critical once her community forsakes her. According to Hindu legend, the mischievous Krishna often committed semi-destructive but playful pranks, particularly on his cow-herding consorts, the *gopis*. When the *gopis* complained to Krishna's foster mother, Yasoda, "her anger at his mischief and ultimate forgiveness [manifested] in an orgy of hugs, kisses and the inevitable 'overflowing of maternal milk'" (Kakar 152). This irrepressible love for Krishna and inability to stay angry with him sets a precedent for Jashoda to likewise forgive her metaphoric children, a group that includes not only the milk-fed sons of the Haldar family but her own children as well. Even Jashoda's husband seems initially to depend on her maternal ministrations.

Kangali's love for his wife drives his "filial inclination" to "handl[e] her capacious bosom" in the afternoons, after which he blissfully falls asleep (41). This mother-son relationship between spouses is not unusual according to the narrator, who attributes it to "the power of the Indian soil that [turns] all women...into mothers here [while] all men remain immersed in the spirit of holy childhood"; the literal divinity of these roles is underscored with the insistent description: "Each man the Holy Child and each woman the Divine Mother" (47). This divine yet naturalized destiny removes

responsibility from the characters to resist taking advantage of their Mothers' generosity; indeed, how can they resist what fate has determined in the soil? In addition, the narrator offers a human cause for the continued cultivation of traditional Indian women's self-sacrificing behavior and the elision of their wifely and maternal duties that augments the naturalized claims:

Jashoda is fully an Indian woman, whose unreasonable, unreasoning, and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness, have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati-Savitri-Sita through Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani. The creeps of the world understand by seeing such women that the old Indian tradition is still flowing free—they understand that it was with such women in mind that the following aphorisms have been composed—‘A female's life hangs on like a turtle's’—‘her heart breaks but no word is uttered’—‘the woman will burn, her ashes will fly/Only then will we sing her/praise on high.’

(47)

This passage predicts Jashoda's peculiar fate while its generalizations of “Indian tradition” and “Indian women” suggest very little agency on the latter's part, not to mention a glossing over of myriad individual exceptions in both categories.

In support of the narrator's claim, Hindi film depictions of maternal self-sacrifice do create a powerful, if nearly homogenous, model of martyrdom. The hugely popular, award-winning film *Bharat Mata* (“Mother India,” 1957) is the most popular example of this theme. It features the near-death exhaustion and ultimate triumph of a destitute but

loyal farmer's wife, who attempts to save her three sons by procuring food for them through famine and flood while wholly unsupported by her community. Abandoned by her disabled husband, the faithful wife remains true to her marriage vows by neither succumbing to a loan shark's lascivious advances (he offers food for her children in return for her consent), or remarrying and thereby gaining wealth. The heroine's pained expressions and heartbreaking songs remind the audience of the spiritual value and rewards of maternal and marital sacrifice, that is, she will be celebrated as the aphorisms promise, only once "her ashes" have flown from the pyre of a faithful sati. This remake of an earlier version of the same film by the director, Mehboob Khan, was the first in India to receive an Oscar nomination ("Best Foreign Film"), and continues to attract audiences in India, where it has shown continuously since its release in 1958. Both the images of self-sacrificing mothers and their popularity endure.¹⁰²

Sati, Savitri, and Sita, moreover, are legendary heroines of the Hindu epics, whose devoted abstemiousness on their husbands' behalf contributes to the ever generous, loyal and self-sacrificing "good woman" trope. This model has secured their worship for centuries and clearly influences Jashoda's sense of duty toward her husband

¹⁰² A recent, 2005 *Tribune* article by film critic Nirupama Dutt notes the persistent success of "mom-mania" on the screen. Dutt explains the phenomenon in part as due to the significance of mothers within Indian family relationships. She writes, "The mother figure in the Indian psyche is different from that in the West. Julia Glancy, [the British] wife of a pre-Partition Punjab Governor once during her stay in India remarked in surprise, 'The strongest relationship in India is between mother and son and not husband and wife.' To the Indian mind, deeply entrenched in the concepts of Mother Earth and Mother Goddess, there is nothing strange or surprising about this [...] This concept has been liberally splashed in popular art, including calendars, posters and advertisements." Dutt, Nirupama. "Mum's the Word." *Spectrum*. 16 January 2005. *The Tribune*. 24 Sept. 2005. <<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2005/20050116/spectrum/main5.htm>>.

and family. Other models of divine nurturing help shape the characters in “Breast-Giver,” irrespective of gender, demonstrating the range of influence enjoyed by the Goddess and her adherents. Haldarbabu’s unprecedented generosity toward Kangali after the accident, for example, is attributed to the will of “the mother of the universe,” the goddess Shakti. His motivation is gendered female to emphasize the Mother’s power to influence her devotees, and contrasts with the lesser sense of responsibility toward the Brahmin and Jashoda felt by Haldar’s more secular wife and children.

Religious precedent in the form of India’s popular Krishna cult provides another interpretation of the collective enjoyment of Jashoda’s storied abilities and subsequent denial of her illness. Sudhir Kakar attributes the attraction of this cult to its celebration of Krishna’s mythical appetites, specifically his “voracious childhood hunger for milk” which could hardly be fulfilled by human provisions. (Many of Krishna’s pranks alluded to above involve stealing the *gopis’* stored milk.) Kakar draws psychoanalytic conclusions from the successful recruitment of “oppressed castes and classes” to the Krishna cult and its glorification of indulgence to establish the power of myth and its effects on people who desire to satisfy their various urges by engaging in impulsive behavior (144). To his argument I would add my reading of the incidents of thievery practiced by the characters of “Breast-Giver,” which presages their nonreciprocal use of Jashoda’s maternal gifts. Kakar suggests that because women are “primarily, though not exclusively” the audience for myths that feature Jashoda’s namesake Yasoda, Krishna’s own milk-mother, this proves an attempt to instantiate self-sacrifice as an appealing female trait into the Indian cultural imagination (146). It seems plausible that the

celebration of Yasoda and the myths surrounding her subconsciously influence women to furnish “Krishna’s” desires in their own relationships. The myth mentioned above of Yasoda’s overflow of milk in forgiveness of her foster son reinforces the message that mothers will suffer their sons’ theft without complaint. They must feel encouraged, like Jashoda, to fulfill the insatiable hungers of their real or metaphoric children without regard to the toll it takes on their personal health or well being.¹⁰³

The wealth of narrative and nonfiction examples of the so-called “unreasonable, unreasoning, and unintelligent devotion” of traditional Indian women seems to portray them as unconscious of choosing a path of self-abnegation, insinuating that it is predestined for them at birth. Kakar’s psychoanalytic interpretations contribute to this overdetermined account of female self-sacrifice. Admittedly, the distinctions between destiny and desire inculcated by years of cultural indoctrination are hard to identify; “Breast-Giver” suggests a collapse of the two with claims like “Frankly Jashoda[’s...] mother-love wells up for Kangali as much as for the children. She *wants* to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest” (47, my emphasis). For Jashoda, then, being a loyal wife and mother entails her endless giving, and doesn’t distinguish between children and adult partner: all rely on her maternal resources. Once revered by her community as a manifest goddess, Jashoda accepts the fantasy that her resources, like Mother Earth’s, might be endlessly replenished, harvest after fulsome harvest—a fallacious as well as dangerous assumption. Her own admission that her breasts produced “a flood of milk” even after weaning her

¹⁰³ This form of sacrificial mothering resonates with Sethe’s loss of self near the end of *Beloved* as she struggles to assuage her daughter’s bottomless appetites.

first child supplements Mistress Haldar's sacred cow comparison and underscores Jashoda's complicity in assuming properties of the divine (50).

Despite the story's emphasis on female provision by goddesses or their earthly incarnations, traditional Indian men are also expected to contribute to their family's income. The duality inherent in Hindu concepts of gendered complements, described elsewhere as constructions of heat and coolness and color dynamics, requires a partnership between the sexes to achieve proper balance. Put crudely, the Mother Earth needs seed to produce her abundance. Kangali glosses this relationship in a self-serving fashion, warning his newly professional wife "“You'll have milk in your breasts only if you have a child in your belly”" (51). His perception of Jashoda's work permits his continued sexual satisfaction. Presuming that she, too, lives under a system of reward and remuneration, Jashoda approaches her husband for reciprocal support once she loses her job and position as her family's full breadwinner. She accuses Kangali of eating "the food that sucked [her] body" and reminds him of the reversal of gender roles in their family: "The man brings, the woman cooks and serves. My lot is inside out. Then you ate my food, now you'll give me food. Fair's fair" (58). Spurned by Kangali's conniving retort that the Haldar house only hired her because *his* "legs were cut off," and suffering from a long history of giving without return, Jashoda's expectations of reciprocity are defeated. The failure of her hopes illustrates the ironic potential of goddess worship to harm its female participants.

John Stratton Hawley explains that "Many feminists, both in India and abroad, have hoped that other forms of empowerment [besides nationalist unity] would flow from

the Hindu worship of goddesses. They have hoped ... that to participate in a religious tradition that addresses divinities as female is to impart strength to real, human women.”¹⁰⁴ “Breast-Giver” demonstrates how Hindu goddess worship can help to temporarily elevate a woman’s status while not necessarily empowering or securing her self-protection when she ceases to display goddess-like properties. As the Halдар family’s Milk-Mother and Kangali’s “milk-filled faithful wife,” Jashoda “was the object of reverence of the local houses devoted to the Holy Mother,” yet she loses all this with the cessation of her flow (62).

The symbiotic dependency between Jashoda and her professional family ensures that her survival depends on her milk-mothering abilities. Although unique in the quantity she produces, Jashoda is not alone in producing breastmilk. Her services are thus viewed as expendable. Tragically, once her (re)productive ability wanes, she cannot survive. The representation of Jashoda’s demise indicts the system that allows her to give without end but fails to recognize her service once it no longer exists. In this way, the Haldars’ negligence toward Jashoda’s declining health contrasts with Haldarbabu’s contributions to Kangali and his family following the accident. Kangali’s experience illustrates that reciprocal relationships exist in the community; however, the obligation of their participants is complicated by perceptions of the divine associated with the services provided. Haldarbabu’s first concern, for example, is the Brahmin’s feet “turned to ground meat” by the car, making them useless for Halдар’s performance of ritual *bhakti*

¹⁰⁴ Stratton Hawley writes of the inconsistent corollary between goddess worship and Indian women’s empowerment as seen in four essays by Kathleen Erndl, Sarah Caldwell, Donna Wulff, and Cynthia Humes in his co-edited collection with Donna Wulff, *Devi: Goddess of India*, cited above, p. 23.

(42).¹⁰⁵ In Jashoda's case, her fecund body initially produces self-perpetuating, life-giving resources so prolifically that they are considered the result of her divine calling and thus available for the taking. This metaphysical gloss of professional mothering, a term that itself combines sentimental expectations with waged work, makes categorization and accurate quantification of her labor particularly difficult. In contrast, when she ceases to lactate and is hired as a cook by the eldest Haldar daughter-in-law, Jashoda's job shifts to standard service or wage labor that is independent of her reproductive abilities; its payment, therefore, may be more clearly determined. I analyze this transition more fully below.

As the Haldars' wet nurse, Jashoda receives "her daily meals, clothes on feast days, and some monthly pay" along with less tangible social benefits, such as the worship of her fertility, which cannot be considered actual payment for services (51). As "the fruitful Brahmin wife," Jashoda's secondary obligation is her participation in the constant stream of "women's rituals" required by a household that continually reproduces itself. There are also "weddings, showers, namings, and sacred-threadings," which Jashoda attends as "chief fruitful woman," blessing them with her auspicious presence (53). This element of her labor falls into what anthropologist Marcel Mauss called a "system of total services," which unlike "a simple exchange of goods, wealth, and products in transactions concluded [*sic*] by individuals," includes "acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs in which economic transaction is only one element" (5). Despite their departure from formal or conventional

¹⁰⁵ Like the "Younger Wife" featured in my second chapter, Haldarbabu needs the feet of a guru or Brahmin to perform his devotional rituals.

economic exchange, and although they are presented as gifts, such activities are, as Mauss concludes, “in the final analysis...strictly compulsory,” and as such require reciprocation (5).¹⁰⁶

Jashoda’s beneficent presence at ceremonies is part of her requisite performance of professional motherhood. The auspiciousness she provides their sacred rituals yields positive results for her community, for which her paltry stipend from the Haldars does not suffice as payment. Indeed, assessing the value of these combined obligations and their effects on her family’s affairs, Mrs. Haldar realizes that Jashoda’s labor is “worth a million rupees” (51). She concludes that Jashoda’s breast-giving, which relieves the Haldar daughters from performing this all-night duty, allowing their husbands greater sexual access to them and thereby increasing the household peace, is alone worth the expense she pays her (54). As Mistress Haldar’s calculation implies, it seems that the benefits Jashoda receives are intended to serve her employers’ best interests as much or more than her own. For example, Jashoda’s rise in status above the Haldars’ sacred “Mother Cows” only reflects the spiritual impact of her duties on the Haldar sons. Through her nursing of their children, the adult “sons become incarnate Brahma,” credited for having progeny fed on a Brahmin mother’s milk (52).

Although the spiritual virtue of Jashoda’s services complicates their compensation, she explicitly refers to what she does as work and rightly expects it to be

¹⁰⁶ Mauss’s study of archaic societies yielded his conclusions about the impossibility of the truly non-reciprocal gift. I recognize the distinction between Jashoda’s “gifts” as a hired wet-nurse and the heads of clans, about whom Mauss wrote, who were able to offer elaborate banquets and orchestrate the exchange of people (e.g., women and children). Nonetheless, Mauss’s study seems to get at the social expectations that govern exchange relationships at issue in Jashoda’s ancillary responsibilities as professional breast-giver.

repaid. In this context especially the Haldars' eventual neglect of her health seems unconscionably callous. Following Mauss's argument, Jashoda performs her duties for the Haldars as part of a system in which reciprocation is as necessary as her obligatory performance at household rituals. The attendant benefits for the recipients of her milk and their family require them to return payment in kind. Since the nature of Jashoda's work is difficult to quantify, the default option seems a return of care in her old age as minimal return for her multiple decades of duty, yet this fails to happen. Writing about Mauss's exploration of the "gift economy," Lewis Hyde notes that, "It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a bond of feeling between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection" (qtd. in Singh 147). I turn now to examine how Jashoda's breast-giving becomes classified in the second category rather than, as one might expect, the first.

Milk- and Other Mothers

*Jashoda was not an amateur mama
like the daughters and wives of the master's house. (40)*

Jashoda's exceptional performance of motherhood is marked by comparison to other women's mothering in the story. Sharing attributes with the divine, like fecund physical traits, adds to the widely held belief that Jashoda is made to mother, though this assumption is presumably true of all women. A young Jashoda, in fact, compares her own propensity to breed with Mistress Haldar's impressive brood of thirteen, which proves the naturalness of maternity indicated by her follow-up rhetorical query, "Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit?" (52). Of course there are exceptions to this rule, even within the same short

story. Not every Indian woman performs ideal womanhood through “excessive” maternity. For example, the daughters and daughters-in-law in the Haldar household challenge conventional expectations by controlling their pregnancies and “call[ing] a halt at twelve-thirteen-fourteen” (55). These surprisingly high figures—ironically alluded to by the narrator—still fall short of the patriarch’s dream of “filling half [of] Calcutta with Haldars” (56). This new breed of women, exposed to liberating feminist dogma and the “new wind” of capitalist change, parasitically depend on Jashoda’s professional mothering in order to realize their own independence from that all-consuming role. The daughters-in-law in particular are able to resist addictive motherhood and “the power of the Indian soil,” as long as Jashoda is present. Significantly, it seems that someone must assume the behavior of ideal femininity in order for others to resist doing so.

Jashoda’s milk-mothering ensures two very important changes in the Haldar household, both of which affect the quality of other women’s lives. First, once her role is established, the Haldar sons who formerly molested the maidservants begin to see these women as peers of their venerated wet nurse and turn their libidinous attentions elsewhere. Second, Jashoda’s assumption of the suckling duties relieves the Haldar daughters-in-law of that burden, which used to “ruin their shape” and cause their husbands to stray. Moreover, it allows them to wear blouses of “European” design and attend “all-night picture shows” while fasting during religious holidays without having to nurse their babies on empty stomachs (54). For the husbands of these women the benefits are even greater. Jashoda’s work as milk-mother allows the men to “be the Holy Child in bed The wives no longer have an excuse to say ‘no’” (54). This reference to holy

childhood to which the men desire to return reinforces the message of the long quotation above, which contends that India's soil cultivates this desire along with women's willingness to emulate the Holy Mother. With the free choice permitted by wealth, however, the Halдар women may more easily decide when to assume and when to resist mothering, to the extent that they may refuse their husbands' sexual advances and pass off nursing duties to someone else. As a professional mother, this is not Jashoda's prerogative.¹⁰⁷

Despite the various ways in ¹which she is used, Jashoda is not entirely exploited by her job or the people who employ her. She relishes her acquired eminence as "The Goddess," and "a portion of the Mother" (54, 61). Indeed, her apparent complicity helps to complicate the narrative. Jashoda shares the fantasy that she is made to mother, criticizing the weaknesses of other women who require Western medical crutches of "medicine" and "doctor's visits" to survive their pregnancies—she condemns women who use injections to dry up their breast milk—while she, "a year-breeder," has no physical failings as a result (54). Her "vocal" opinions ironically damn her own health as well as prompt humbling accusations of being "the master's servant as much as" any of her former devotees once her position changes from breast-giver to cook (62). Though the text does not provide a description of Jashoda's material compensation beyond what is mentioned above, the intangible benefits of performing as chief fruitful woman contribute to her increased "vanity." Additional benefits of Jashoda's famous employment include easily finding husbands for her daughters and seeing her sons

¹⁰⁷ Kangali's equation of pregnancy with Jashoda's lactation further restricts her from "saying 'no'" to her husband as she might choose.

praised in the community “because they were [her] children,” both of which presumably bring her great pleasure and pride and economically assist the family (53). It is nonetheless significant, however, that she functions as a “token of exchange” of services between her professional and private families.¹⁰⁸

Jashoda’s body is a tool for “keeping alive her world of countless beings” and like detached mechanisms of this apparatus, she refers to her breasts as “these” and “them” and later rightly blames her husband for “[l]iving off [her] carcass,” referring to his parasitical use of her body and foreshadowing its inevitable collapse (59). The term parasite seems particularly apt to describe how Jashoda is treated, since once drained of its use value, both her professional and private families discard her body. Neither one appreciates her worth beyond her literal production of milk and auspicious presence as an actively maternal Brahmin.

Mahasweta parallels Jashoda’s weakening condition with the rise of the Haldar daughters-in-law’s westernized independence, what the narrator refers to as “a new wind.” In doing so, she passes judgment on the encroachment of modernization and its disparate benefits enjoyed by various empowered women. Riding the second-wave feminism of the mid-seventies and early eighties, as well as the feudal system’s replacement by capitalism, the “new wind” enters the Haldar household. The family home, formerly mired “in the sixteenth century,” empties of child-rearing, obsequious young women, who now accompany their husbands to work rather than remaining housebound and pregnant. The mistress Haldar bemoans this sign of “progress” and the

¹⁰⁸ I am grateful to Martha Selby for discussing this concept with me and supplying the quoted phrase. This exchange of women is silently noted in Mahasweta’s text.

dismissal of her husband's wishes. Disappointed and defeated by the refusal of her daughters-in-law to conform to tradition, she dies, leaving her eldest in charge of the home and Jashoda's professional, which is also her private, fate.

The descendent of Haldarbabu recognizes Jashoda's contribution to her family's subsistence, but demotes its importance per the rules of capitalist enterprise; once rendered, her services will no longer be continually repaid. She tells Jashoda, "You reared everyone on your milk, food was sent every day. The last child was weaned, still Mother sent you food for eight years. She did what pleased her. Her children said nothing. But it's no longer possible" (57-58). She can conceive of retaining Jashoda only if she cooks for the household in return for which her "board is taken care of," but not that of her family (58). The feudal adherence to a "system of total services" no longer applies. The new wind only acknowledges formal economies of exchange in which commodities are purchased and sold and Jashoda's "gifts" go unreciprocated.

The new matriarch reveals her true motives in allowing Jashoda to stay on in the house, which recall Haldarbabu's reverence for Kangali's feet: "You suckled the children, *and* you're a Brahmin. So stay. But sister, it'll be hard for you" (62, original emphasis). Her term of address invokes an insincere sisterhood since theirs is not a relationship of equals; she is Jashoda's employer and therefore wields power over her. The mistress's stress on Jashoda's Brahmin status, moreover, reveals the lingering significance of caste; however, she explains that Jashoda's demotion from revered milk-mother to common cook warrants no special treats or expectations of grandeur; she must work humbly among the servants who used to praise her. In the mind of the capitalist

daughter-in-law this is how duty is served. Once her wages are paid, all obligations to Jashoda and her family are fulfilled. The transition from sixteenth-century feudalistic honor codes to twentieth-century capitalism removes any ethical responsibility to value the worker for her lifetime of service.

Radical Mothering & Ideology: The Limits of Marxist- Feminist Interpretation

Mothering is not generally thought of in and of itself as paid work, an ongoing women's rights debate that reached a head in India near the time when "Breast-Giver" was written. Yet Mahasweta strategically employs the term "professional mother" to describe Jashoda's status, indicating that she is paid for her labor and that she is doing work in addition to the normative responsibilities of mothering. Unlike private mothering, which may fairly assume an eventual affective reward for maternal care giving, the outcome of wet-nursing proves less certain. Feminist scholars have long observed the indeterminate boundaries of public and private spheres in regard to "women's work," particularly those that incorporate elements of maternity of the kind examined here, which contribute to the challenge of assessing its appropriate payment. For instance, in addition to Kangali's somewhat sinister charge that Jashoda's pregnancies are part of her job, Mrs. Halдар rewards Jashoda with edible treats whenever she becomes pregnant. While attempts have been made to quantify the responsibilities of motherhood for remuneration purposes, maternity has reciprocal peculiarities that are difficult to classify using traditional economic concepts. Nonetheless, "Breast-Giver"

seems at first glance to lend itself precisely to the kind of analysis Marxist feminist theory can provide.

Seen through the lens of such theory, wet-nursing takes on extremely complicated gradations. On one hand, it is the epitome of unalienated labor in that Jashoda's reproductive and lactation abilities become synonymous with her means of employment. Yet to paraphrase Spivak's Marxist-feminist reading of "Breast-Giver," Jashoda becomes "alienated" from her breasts once they come to represent her mechanism for making money in a world that belongs to the professional. The contingent connection between biological ability and employment results in the concurrent decline of Jashoda's fertility and her performance of this type of work—as well as the deterioration of her health. Thus, the positive Marxist outcome of a worker's investment in the product of her labor is somewhat overshadowed by the physical vulnerability of a breast-giver's career.

Spivak ultimately dismisses the Marxist-feminist interpretation of "Breast-Giver" as "another reductive allegorical or parabolic reading," unhelpful to discovering the "signals put up by the text" as Mahasweta's own reading ("For Teacher" 84). I have alluded to key features of this interpretation above, such as Jashoda's excess milk that gains exchange value when given to children other than those that she births. Mahasweta seems to underline this distinction when she uses the English word "surplus" to describe Jashoda's excessive lactation in her original Bengali manuscript. Spivak likewise remarks on this and the reversal of "the sexual division of labor" I mention in describing the (ultimately failed) reciprocal possibilities of Jashoda's marital relationship (86). What Spivak retains of Marxist-feminist theory is its commentary on value over materialist

production. Linking, as I have, the cultural significance of maternity with its value to the community at the expense of the mother, Spivak warns against the way in which Jashoda's productive ability becomes "vulnerable to idealization and therefore to insertion [I would add 'without proper reciprocation'] into the economic." She writes, "It is here that the story of the emergence of value from Jashoda's labour-power infiltrates Marxism and questions its gender-specific presuppositions" (93).

Significantly, the viability of this critique and its implications for further study are foreclosed by the limitations presumed by nationalist ideology. What Spivak somewhat dismissively refers to as "educated mothercraft ... heard among the Indian indigenous elite today" (94), I read as the dangerous political maneuvering of Mother India rhetoric with which I began this essay. It would seem, therefore, that the "woman question" must ultimately be settled apart from ideological claims about maternity as socially venerable and necessary to the unification of the Indian or Hindu nation-state. Just as it has enforced female acquiescence to ideal gendered behavior in the name of nationalism, so too can seemingly positive maternalist ideology—if not radically linked to economic power—prevent women's potential to progress apart from traditional expectations of so-called good, e.g., sacrificial, mothers.

Conclusion: Motherhood, the great addiction

Although she first nurses fifty children, Jashoda dies alone. The final lines of "Breast-Giver" function as her epitaph, since her death occurs without remark from her community. They read: "Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she

thought. Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone" (75). It seems that Jashoda is punished for transgressing her mortal bounds and believing in the myth so vehemently enforced on her to act as divine Milk-Mother. The ideology that led her to do so, however, might have been inescapable. Indeed, the story's concluding message is unclear as there appears to be mutual castigation of those characters who ignore Jashoda's developing cancer, the conflated systems of gender, nationalism and class hegemonies that allow this to occur, and finally, Jashoda's complicity in her glorification; no source is identified as solely responsible for blame.

Equating Jashoda with God, however, dangerously enforces the self-sacrificing image of Hindu Mother Goddesses without challenging the insinuation of their divine properties into mortal bodies. That is, if Hindu women continue to mother in Jashoda's fashion, they will likely give more to their "holy children" than they will ever receive in return. If read as a cautionary tale written by an astute social reformer, Mahasweta's story provides counsel against the addiction that maternity of this kind presents. Indeed, by soliciting the reception of international readers and scholars of Indian literature and culture, "Breast-Giver" makes the sinister alliances of capitalism and uncritical first-world feminism that contribute to idealized, maternalist fictions apparent to a broad audience, and urges continued study of the intersections of gender, caste and class identity in the depiction of maternal subjects.

Epilogue

Throughout the dissertation I have acknowledged cultural nuances that affect notions of the self in relation to one's community, those that trouble discrete boundaries between mothers and their children and, more generally, women and those who depend on them. But I have still to envision how my study of breast-giving might provide an exemplar of assessing human relationships that moves away from the rational, liberal preoccupation with the self that figures autonomy as a universal human goal. I also have yet to deeply interrogate the fact that breastmilk functions in a way wholly distinct from other commodities that accrue wealth or power for their possessor through accumulation.

An astute member of my dissertation committee commented that one doesn't "keep" breastmilk that isn't given away; it must be dispensed in some form or another. I am intrigued by this concept and how it might affect our understanding of waste and wealth in the context of breast-giving. An early draft of the dissertation contained another story by Ginu Kamani, "Shakuntala," in which the title character, a lactating servant whose child has died, relieves the pressure of her excess breastmilk by squirting it on the ground until she adopts a blind, starving kitten that she hides in her clothing and nurses with milk she expresses into her hand. This story exemplifies a type of personhood and social understanding that moves away from commodity or property-oriented relationships and indicates a new direction in which my research may go.

The absence in the current document of any extended investigation of alternatives to a liberal version of "self" reveals my attempt to avoid overdetermining the physical propensity to lactate and its psychoanalytical implications. I felt it necessary to first

establish that studying breastfeeding could yield critical economic discoveries within literary texts, and that its place there might be best recognized if aligned with the liberal model. I am ready now to consider the potentially fruitful intersections of my work with different models of subjectivity and their impact on identity issues ranging from gender conformity and citizenship to biopiracy, all of which, like literary instances of breast-giving, stretch and help to reconfigure the rational or liberal norm of personhood relied on here.

Ironically, the more than decade-old impetus for my project is the conception of subjectivity developed in the psychoanalytic feminist philosophy of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray. These theorists argue in a variety of ways that the unique reproductive potential of women, which allows them to produce and contain another being within themselves, troubles discrete concepts of self and other and thus alters notions of independence, altruism, and exchange. This embodiment-based theory extends to affective desire as well. Irigaray's description of the self-touching female body, introduced in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, radically challenges phallocentric beliefs about love and desire by presenting these emotions in relation to what she later referred to in *Elemental Passions* as "a living, moving border. Changed through contact with your body" (Irigaray 51). The symbolic order these theorists imagine is grounded in the physical experiences portrayed in the fiction my dissertation addresses. Studying this corpus with an eye to their philosophical if not psychoanalytic message might yield an interesting heuristic of relational or care-motivated activity distinct from an over-privileged assessment of autonomy or independence.

Other scholars involved in recuperating this philosophical approach to inform their literary analyses include feminist historian Miglena Nikolchina, whose *Matricide in Language: Writing Theory in Kristeva and Woolf* (2004) importantly contributes to libidinal economic theory as it applies to literary criticism. Nikolchina contends that war has been waged on the so-called French feminists who “have been persistently marginalized on the American scene” (2). This disavowal of alternative approaches to understanding desire are indicative of what Kristeva writes is, at present, a “reactionary conformity that manages to discredit any notion of feminine specificity or freedom that is not based on seduction—which means not based on reproduction or consumption” (qtd. in Nikolchina 2). My sense of this discreditation admittedly influenced my own reluctance to include French feminist theory in my work, a decision I now regret.

Nikolchina explains, “Kristeva’s writing makes us face the requirement that we take into account the subject of theory as part of the theory itself” (20). Her statement describes both the importance of embodiment or materiality in Kristeva’s theory and its intersection with my own future research. I can imagine a non-consumption or reproductive oriented teleology with a subject at its center whose motivations lie not in individuation but rather in a relational concept of interdependence. Indeed, the accounting of the (female) body that Kristeva requires necessitates a re-conceptualization of breast-giving that differs from how I have presented it in the preceding pages. Rather than using their lactation to enter female characters into neo-classical economic conversations as agents, we might think of the narratives as presenting new analytical models of selfhood that center around milk.

Recognizing this theoretical potential, my dissertation committee has asked me to imagine a world run by breastmilk. In addition to making milk the determining focus of the self, I take their charge to mean a world in which breastfeeding functions as a significant model of exchange, creating transactions motivated not by self/other or subject/object dialectics but by relationships of dependency and care across less clearly defined boundaries. Such a world would allow breastfeeding to transcend its function as solely integral to infant health and invocations of maternal bonding by introducing compelling non-familial connections between lactating women and recipients of their milk—and, by extension, relationships that mimic the symbiotic or inter-dependency of nursing mothers and their children.¹⁰⁹ These exchanges would not necessarily translate to worth in economic terms but could dramatically influence a new appreciation of breast-giving as a symbolically significant determiner of social connection. Likewise, being able (or willing) to breast-give would not confer self-abnegating sacrificial status upon the giver but would instead suggest a more developed understanding of self. Using instances of breast-giving to open new avenues for alternative readings of value, power, and exchange will be one charge the book version of this project hopes to answer.

An additional goal will be to link these issues to a topic already raised in the dissertation, that is, the dual vulnerability and power of lactation. “Breast-Giver” points

¹⁰⁹ Many fiction writers have explored this possibility in genres ranging from the neo-historical to science- and speculative fiction, in which characters such as vampires or aliens rely on symbiotic relationships of exchange that blur the boundaries of self and other. See especially Octavia E. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy or *Patternist* series, or her latest novel *Fledgling*. I would like to pursue a comprehensive study of this corpus in conjunction with non-rational, psychoanalytic theories of interdependence.

out the national level contradiction of venerating goddess-like quantities of milk production without translating this value to the long-term protection of wet-nurses. Likewise with the Younger Wife, whose breastmilk—though intrinsically tied to her chief duty of producing children for her husband’s family—can be used at her expense as a tool to manipulate her mother-in-law. Even though the Wife eventually imitates this use to achieve her own ends, the possible appropriation of her milk exemplifies the ambiguous nature of this substance that may simultaneously benefit and harm women. A world in which breastmilk is preeminent would address this conflict by acknowledging the connection between milk’s symbolic and material functions—valuing the latter as a result of the former. I am not arguing here for a stronger sense of women as milk-producing animals, rather I seek a heightened concern with and appreciation for women’s physical comfort that better reflects their symbolic elevation, both in India and elsewhere, which would in turn result in their improved labor conditions and remuneration for work that is currently undervalued and poorly paid.

My somewhat idealistic vision of how breast-giving studies might address this disparity includes a better understanding of women’s often silenced or overlooked presence in the economic realm as care-givers, mothers, and desiring beings influenced by their embodied potential. Another possible contribution of my scholarship, therefore, will be to shift social consciousness toward recognizing the non-production oriented behavior of women who participate in neoclassical economies in ways other than autonomous subjects might. Rather than assign importance to breast-giving’s echo of dominant models of independence, therefore, I’d like to reflect on ways of reading this

activity outside the norm, to show how it opens up possibilities for embodiment theory and its transcendence of the binary selfish/selfless categories of motivation. Here is where I think the most radical potential of this research lies.

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