



MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Water, Memory and Maternity within African Diasporic Fiction

verfasst von | submitted by
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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2024

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 066 844

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme as it appears on the student
record sheet:

Masterstudium Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Ass.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Maria Katharina Wiedlack

Abstrakt

Wasser ist ein Motiv, das sowohl symbolisch als auch kontextuell in der Afrikanische diasporischen Ausdruckstradition auftaucht. Orte wie der Atlantik, Flüsse und andere Wasserläufe finden sich oft in Geschichten, die sich speziell mit Themen wie der Geschichte, Kultur und Identität der Schwarzen befassen. Postkoloniale Wissenschaftler haben die Theorie aufgestellt, dass dies auf die Erinnerung an die Mittelpassage zurückzuführen ist: die erzwungene Reise versklavter Menschen von Afrika nach Amerika, die den Ozean als Symbol und Ort des Verlusts und der Auslöschung im Gedächtnis der afrikanischen Diaspora verankert hat. Diese These beobachtet jedoch die Art und Weise, wie diasporische Schriftsteller durch eine Praxis der Rückgewinnung und Neudefinition zu den Wasserläufen zurückkehren und die Geographien des Wassers zu Orten umgestalten, an denen die Geschichte der Schwarzen neu erdacht und nacherzählt werden kann. Solche Prozesse werden durchgeführt, indem Wasser als mütterlich definiert wird, wobei Schriftsteller wie Rivers Solomon, Toni Morrison und Julie Dash Wasserläufe in ihren jeweiligen Werken als Orte kultureller Wiedergeburt und mütterlicher Möglichkeiten etablieren. Die Beziehung zwischen Wasser und Mutterschaft wurde bereits von Personen wie Christina Sharpe untersucht. Sie definiert schwarze Mutterschaft jedoch als Synonym für eine symbolische Mittelpassage und verbindet Wasser und Mutterschaft über Bilder kolonialer Gewalt. Diese Dissertation untersucht, wie sich *The Deep* von Rivers Solomon, *Beloved* von Toni Morrison und *Daughters of the Dust* von Julie Dash dem widersetzen, und zeigt, wie jede Autorin Wasser als einen Ort neu verhandelt, der grenzenlose Wiedergeburt über neu erdachte Bilder der Mutterschaft sanktioniert, wo die Geschichte und Erinnerung der afrikanischen Diaspora neu definiert und neu erzählt werden kann. Ich führe diese Arbeit mittels einer dekolonialen Praxis durch, aufbauend auf Christina Sharpes gefeiertem Werk *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*, und übernehme ihre Wake-Work-Methodik als Mittel, um zu untersuchen, wie Solomon, Dash und Morrison Wasser mit Mutterschaft durch eine Rhetorik der Wiedergeburt und Befreiung verbinden und die fortbestehende Erinnerung an die Mittelpassage neu verhandeln.

Abstract

Water is a motif which appears both symbolically and contextually within the African Diasporic expressive tradition. Sites such as the Atlantic Ocean, river ways and other water courses are

often found within stories which specifically deal with topics such as Black history, culture and identity. Postcolonial scholars have theorised that this is due to the memory of the Middle Passage: the forced voyage of enslaved people from Africa to America which has situated the ocean as a symbol and location of loss and erasure within African Diasporic memory. This thesis observes, however, the ways in which Diasporic writers are returning to watercourses via a practice of reclamation and redefinition, renegotiating geographies of water into locations where Black history can be reimagined and retold. Such processes are carried out through defining water as maternal, with writers such as Rivers Solomon, Toni Morrison and Julie Dash establishing watercourses in their respective works as sites of cultural rebirth and maternal possibility. The relationship between water and maternity has previously been explored by the likes of Christina Sharpe. She, however, defines Black maternity as synonymous with a symbolic Middle Passage, linking water and maternity via images of colonial violence. This dissertation explores how *The Deep* by Rivers Solomon, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Daughters of the Dust* by Julie Dash resist this and demonstrates how each writer renegotiates water as a site which sanctions limitless rebirth via reimagined images of maternity, where African Diasporic history and memory can be redefined and retold. I carry out this work through a decolonial praxis, building on Christina Sharpe's acclaimed work *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*, adopting her wake work methodology as a means of investigating how Solomon, Dash and Morrison connect water with maternity through a rhetoric of rebirth and liberation, renegotiating the persisting memory of the Middle Passage.

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1. Introduction

In African Diasporic literature, water is a motif which is frequently present within narratives of Black history and the Black experience. Postcolonial theorists such as Christina Sharpe and Walter Johnson have speculated that much of contemporary Diasporic literary expression is fuelled by the collective and cultural memory of the Middle Passage: the forced voyage of enslaved people from Africa to America where “ten to eleven million people [...] were packed beneath slave ship decks” in the “peak decades between 1700-1850” (Johnson 4). It is estimated that “two million died on the journey” (Harris et al 52). For this reason, the Atlantic has become deeply embedded within narratives of Diasporic memory and heritage, with the ocean existing as a memorial site where African culture, history and identity have been lost. By extension, the Atlantic Ocean has thus been defined by the likes of Anissa Jean Wardi as a geography of murder, loss and “grief,” with water itself functioning as a symbolic device to capture experiences of collective racial trauma and fractured memory within African Diasporic literature (Wardi 8). Anissa Wardi and Christina Sharpe have contributed a detailed body of work to the field of postcolonial studies when it comes to the intersection of water and memory. Their respective works *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Sharpe) and *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective* (Wardi) have concluded the necessity to approach watercourses as essential points of analysis within the Diasporic expressive tradition. For Sharpe, to live in the aftermath of slavery is to be “haunt[ed]” by the Middle Passage, placing the waters of the Atlantic Ocean at the centre of contemporary African experience (Sharpe 18). Such haunting, intrinsically links birth with inevitable death. Sharpe notes that “to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery as yet unresolved unfolding” (13,14). This relationship between birth and death is elaborated by Sharpe through her analysis of “Partus Sequitur Ventrem” which translates to: “that which is brought forth follows the womb” (Sharpe 15). Christina Sharpe explains that within the laws of slavery, this statute ensured that “the Black child inherits the non/ status, the non/being of the mother” who was seen under chattel laws as “property” of the white man (15). Sharpe approaches this through the metaphor of the slave ship: “the belly of the ship births blackness; the birth canal remains in, and as, the hold. The belly of the ship births blackness as no/relation” (Sharpe 74). “This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living

under the sentence of death” (Glissant qtd. in Sharpe 73). Sharpe’s analysis here demonstrates that maternity is intrinsically linked to discussions surrounding the Middle Passage, Blackness and memory. The metaphor of the slave ship as the womb illustrates that Blackness has historically been defined by the colonisation of maternity and by extension, the ocean becomes a “floating graveyard,” the site where African memory and heritage are lost through the colonised “birth canal” (Wardi 8, Sharpe 74).

While Sharpe’s scholarship is significantly informative in examining the relationship between birth/death and the haunting of the Atlantic, a development in Diasporic literature this thesis would like to investigate is how writers and creators of the African expressive tradition are returning to these watery sites of traumatic memory, transforming and renegotiating them into spaces where memory, heritage and maternity can be radicalised and rewritten. Writers such as Rivers Solomon, Toni Morrison and Julie Dash have demonstrated the potential for the ocean and other water courses to be transformed into spaces where new life and new possibilities can be reclaimed and retold. Through an analysis of the intersection of water, memory and maternity in *The Deep* (Solomon), *Beloved* (Morrison) and *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash), my thesis will explore the ways in which water is defined and constructed as a maternal site, transmitting and transforming African Diasporic memory. By engaging with water’s mutable and cyclical form, I will argue that water sanctions limitless rebirth, where African history can be redefined and retold outside the constraints of a colonised historical paradigm. In addition, I will simultaneously investigate how water not only sits as a site of rebirth and maternalism, but also how it can radicalise motherhood itself, challenging the notions of gender, sexuality and colonialism, redefining, reclaiming and resisting the notion of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*.

In each of the three primary works, water is used as a metaphor to communicate concepts of race, maternity and gender, and I will undertake a semiotic analysis, approaching water as a vessel for establishing cultural transcendence. I have decided to situate this thesis within a decolonial framework. Decoloniality is understood as an “ongoing” practice which “cannot be described in the past tense” (Karabinos 130). It is a continuous process of becoming and redefinition, and as my three chosen sources are grounded in themes of resistance, renegotiation and radicalisation, such a theoretical method seems appropriate. In this context, Sharpe’s *In the*

Wake: On Blackness and Being, will sit as this thesis' backbone. While Sharpe's work is often categorised within the field of postcolonial studies, she engages in a decolonial rhetorical practice whereby her interrogation of the slave trade is centred in exposing its continuing effects on 21st century American culture. Her work is rooted in approaching the Middle Passage symbolically, looking at how colonial structures such as the slave ship, the hold and the ocean can be used as semiotic markers to understand how the memory of slavery persists. It is not possible to carry out this work on water's transformative potential, without acknowledging the pain and trauma that comes with the symbolic memory of the ocean. This first and foremost has to be addressed in order for resistance and reclamation to take place. Sharpe offers such a reading, and *In The Wake*, will therefore be consulted as the vital point of departure from where a new semiotic analysis can take place. For Sharpe, "the hold" of the slave ship is synonymous with "the womb" and renegotiating this tumultuous relationship will form the core of my first chapter (74).

Chapter one will investigate how Solomon, Morrison and Dash reconfigure Sharpe's assertion of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*. "The hold" as "the womb" is resisted by these authors, and instead the womb is spatially extended to the waters of oceans and rivers where new life can be brought forth and nurtured outside of colonial structures. Such an analysis will be grounded in Anissa J. Wardi's intersectional work on decolonisation and ecocriticism which approaches the ocean and other natural watercourses as a metaphorical site for healing. It is important to define water as inherently maternal here, and I will do so through analysing water's cyclical patterns, mapping it onto the cycles of the maternal body. Gaston Bachelard and his work on the semiosis of water within poetic imagination will be consulted, with his scholarship defining water as a "continuous and irresistible birth" (14).

The second chapter of this thesis will look more closely at how water is allegorically used by Solomon, Morrison and Dash to establish matriarchal structures and matrilineal transmission at the centre of their fictional worlds. Through chapter one's renegotiation of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*, the potential for new modes of Diasporic living become possible and these will be intersectionally analysed through Nah Dove's *A Mother Centred Matrix*, which outlines the origination of Matriarchal systems within African cultures. I will again undertake a semiotic

analysis here, looking at the eco structures present in the oceanic and island world of *The Deep* as well as *Daughters of the Dust*, and demonstrate how they symbolically advocate for a “mother-centred” society (Dove 15). In *Beloved*, water will be understood through the motif of breast milk, which will be analysed as a symbol of matrilineal transmission. A permeating narrative throughout the novel is Sethe’s quest to “get her milk to [her] baby” which metaphorically functions as a mother- centred method of passing on Black history, memory and culture to her children (Morrison 20).

The final section of this thesis will focus on how mothering, as an act, is itself radicalised in the three chosen works. This will predominantly be explored through an Anzaldurian understanding of hybridity, whereby watercourses in *The Deep*, *Beloved* and *Daughters of the Dust* call for a reconceptualisation of what a mother/ mothering looks like. *The Deep* calls for motherhood to be understood as a process which does not rely on binary identities. The Wajinru community are half fish/ half human who individually possess both reproductive organs. I will argue therefore that the ocean becomes a space where radicalisation can take place, and motherhood will be investigated as an act which exists outside of human body and gender constraints. Such hybridity is present in the work of Dash and Morrison. Not only will the liminality of Dahtaw island be analysed in *Daughters of the Dust*, but the ways in which water establishes mothering as a process of connectivity between deceased ancestors, the living and children to be born in the future will be investigated. This will be carried out through an analysis of the film’s narrator The Unborn Child, who occupies the marginal space of the shore line. The liminal figure of the Unborn Child, as well as the hybrid site of the shore are symbolically intertwined and determine mothering as a process of cyclical transmission which exists outside of linear time. Radical mothering in *Beloved* takes quite a different form and must be understood through a decolonial definition of resistance. It is important in this chapter that the notion of resistance is not conflated with that of pleasure or satisfaction and therefore a definition put forth by Fredrickson and Walters will be consulted. Resistance in this way will be defined as an “act of subversion” against “the master class” (81). Morrison’s tale climaxes when it is revealed that Sethe murdered her daughter Beloved as an act of protection against the horrors of slavery. Though perverted and brutal, I will explore how such an action can be viewed as an expression of radical love. Such love becomes memorialised whereby Sethe and Beloved’s spirit are reunited through watery

allusions. Water once more acts as a portal between the living and dead, and allows Sethe to reimagine mothering her daughter outside of colonial temporalities.

The conclusion of this thesis will return to Sharpe's work and demonstrate the ways in which fiction and scholarship have continued to expand since her crucial decolonial work *In the Wake*. While this thesis will engage with the darkness and horror of the Middle Passage and its aftermath, my research will demonstrate that returning to the ocean and other watercourses, approaching them as maternal sites, has the potential to transform Diasporic memory as well as decolonise maternity. I will simultaneously reaffirm that water as semiosis has unlimited possibilities within Black literature in which motifs of transcendence, transformation and radicalisation are made possible within the African expressive tradition.

2. Theoretical Background-Defining Decoloniality:

In order to carry out this research, it is important to have an understanding of the concept: Decoloniality and how it functions within literary and cultural studies. For critics such as Walter D. Mignolo, Decoloniality can be understood as a reactionary discourse to that of post-colonialism, which rejects the notion that we are living "after" colonialism, inferred by the prefix "post" (21). For Mignolo, " 'post' assumes unilinear time," something which is rooted in "imperialism" and "modernity" (21). Mignolo continues: "coloniality is still with us" and therefore changing the prefix to "(de)"colonisation, "assumes many temporalities [...] and a pluriversality of local time" (21). In this way, colonisation is not separated from the present, and Decoloniality becomes a practice and a process which "dismantl[es] relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies that came into being [...] in the modern/colonial world" and continue to affect society in the present day (Maldonado -Torres qtd. in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 34).

In The Wake: On Blackness and Being can be understood as a decolonial methodology toward "encountering a past that is not past," which Sharpe approaches through the intersection of the four different definitions of the word "wake" (Sharpe 13). Wake is "a state of consciousness" (Sharpe 4). It is a "track left on the water's surface by a ship" (Sharpe 3). It is "in the line of recoil of (a gun)" (Sharpe 8). It is "a watch or vigil held beside the body of someone who has

died” (Sharpe 10). For Sharpe, the intersection of these four definitions come to accurately define the present day Black experience in which to be “in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery as yet unresolved unfolding” (13/14). The image of the gun, the vigil, the tract of ship and the conscious state of awakeness define Black livelihood as an experience continuously haunted by death. Such an experience requires a process of consistent resistance which Sharpe defines as “wake work” (Sharpe 13). Sharpe deems this “a mode of inhabiting and rupturing th[e] episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives (Sharpe 18). Such ‘rupturing’ for Sharpe involves “remember[ing] the dead” but through a process which is separate from “melancholia and mourning” (Sharpe 19). Sharpe explains this procedure through an analysis of Dionne Brand’s book *A map to the door of no return*, which she regards as an example of wake work. Brand’s novel is a lesson in renegotiating African Diasporic memory whereby those enslaved are reimagined and reconfigured “coming back together in wonder—the traces of their former selves rising up in greeting” (Sharpe 18). Wake work therefore can be summarised as a process of returning to, rewriting and reproaching history, whereby living in a present that is not free from the past must be radicalised into an experience of agency, resurrection and resistance—a process of decolonisation. In the context of this thesis, I want to observe my three chosen sources as products of wake work, while simultaneously undertaking wake work as my analytical methodology. *The Deep, Beloved* and *Daughters of the Dust* are medias which return to tumultuous history in order to reclaim and retell, situating them firmly “in the wake” (Sharpe 5). Through defining and determining water in these stories as a site of continuous birth and rejuvenation- a site where ‘unilinear’ time disintegrates, I will apply the theory of wake work to carry out a decolonial analysis, whereby a dismantling of colonial structures and underpinnings can be observed. Carrying out such work must also rely on consulting other theoretical sub-genres within the field of Decoloniality and therefore concepts such as resistance, hybridity, ecology and matriarchy must be further discussed.

2.1. Decoloniality and a Mother Centred Society:

My second chapter will interrogate how water is used as an allegory for matriarchal practices in my three chosen works. It is therefore important to understand patriarchy as something which is actively decolonial. An inaccuracy often assumed within cultural discourse is that patriarchy as a social structure is simply the inversion of patriarchy. The work of Nah Dove illustrates this to be a falsehood and instead demonstrates that patriarchy simultaneously resists colonisation and patriarchy by putting forth a societal system in which power hierarchies are dismantled. Within Decolonial theory, patriarchy and colonisation cannot be separated and are therefore understood as “a dialectical set of hierarchical relations which involves class, race, ethnicity, gender sexuality, age, nationalism and other determinations, which are often interconnected and multiple” (Hammer 115). Dove notes that “the evolution of this patriarchal state structure is contingent on the genocide of the indigenous or original people” and thus while systems of patriarchy remain, so do those of colonisation (9). The “Mother Centred Matrix,” resists this framework, and puts forth a social order which sees a “balance between the feminine and masculine principles” and calls for society to be “mother-led,” which discerns the mother as “the bringer of life, the conduit for the spiritual regeneration of the ancestors, the bearer of culture, and the centre of social organisation” (6,7). This matrifocal organisation works to create a “reciprocal relationship between the female and male members” within the family unit whereby men and women “will be equally respected for their contribution to the family's development” and in turn, society will “strive to reflect this equality” (Dove 7). It is through this framework I intend to analyse the watery symbolism of patriarchy in *The Deep*, *Beloved* and *Daughters of the Dust*, using Dove and her assertion of the mother centred matrix to decipher matrifocal mothering as an act of colonial resistance.

2.2 Decoloniality and Hybridity:

Hybridity is another concept which can be understood as a method for decolonisation. It functions to resist classification and categorisation of the colonial “episteme” (Sharpe 18). It sits as a form of radicalisation in my chosen works and it will be construed through an Anzalduian lens. While the concept originates in the work of Homi Bhabha, Anzaldúa offers an expansion of Bhabha’s notion of the “third space of enunciation,” providing a practice for occupying these spaces where identification is ambivalent (Bhabha 55). Gloria Anzaldúa, one of the most acclaimed scholars within the field of Border theory, understands hybridity to be a radical way of living for those who represent the “crossing over” of race, gender, culture and sexuality. She defines this way of living as “the work of the mestiza consciousness” which functions to “break down” the colonial binaries embedded within society through a practice which “transcends” such a “duality” (*Borderlands* 102). She further states: “A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war” (*Borderlands* 102). In other words it is a process of embracing the state of “plural personality,” dismantling the binary systems which society is forced to straddle (*Borderlands* 101). Such a process is present in my three works, whereby existing outside a space of dualism becomes a form of radical identification and decolonial resistance. Anzaldúa further uses *The New Mestiza Consciousness* to convey her lived experience as a lesbian, mixed race female. As these texts are matrifocal and tend to the experience of queerness, consulting hybridity through this feminist queer lens is contextually appropriate and will aid specifically in my semiotic analysis pertaining to the genderless world in *The Deep*. Anzaldúa’s work will also aid in comprehending water’s semiotic function. As water is approached as a vehicle for transcendence and resisting classification, it is important that hybridity can be understood metaphorically. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa conveys notions of hybridity through poetry and allegory and thus enables a symbolic approach to the concept.

2.3. Decoloniality and Ecocriticism:

As watercourses are the symbol with which I wish to undertake a decolonial reading of my chosen works, the practice of decolonisation cannot be discussed without an understanding of the world's ecological environment and its relationship with colonisation. Frantz Fanon argues that "colonisation is a success when indocile nature has finally been tamed" (250). Throughout history, the claiming of land and the erasure of indigenous peoples has simultaneously occurred through a process of destroying natural landscapes and environments. This connection between racial oppression and environmental destruction persists today with Wardi noting "that class and race strata largely determine toxic geographies, both nationally and abroad" (16). Ecocriticism, which is simply defined "as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," is a field which has largely been occupied by "Anglo writers" and stems from the tradition of Romantic poetry and nature prose (Wardi 10). It is not a literary space which has included African Diasporic voices, a community who have been disproportionately affected by the exploitation of the Earth. Alice Walker states: "While the Earth is enslaved, none of us is free" (147). Anissa Jean Wardi and her book *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective* demonstrates the importance of approaching ecocriticism as something which has to be inherently decolonial. She explores this notion through a theorising of water. For Wardi, "water—fluid, shifting, and indeterminate" can be "employed" for "theorising survival" and resistance within African literary traditions (3). Her work focuses on water's transmutable molecular makeup, its ability to metamorphosize into different courses / bodies and how such transformation offers an opportunity to reimagine and rewrite literary histories which stem from such traumatised waters. She demonstrates that water sites, such as oceans and rivers which formed the ecological setting to the transatlantic terrors as well as channels and routes to "new and often harsher plantation and worksites," are the very same courses which historically "signalled a deliverance from slavery"- noting the "crossing" of the "Ohio River" as an example (Wardi 3). Water therefore becomes encoded within Diasporic literary and historic imagination. Wardi's approach to water as a symbolic vehicle is how I too wish to investigate the intersection of water memory and maternity in *Beloved*, *The Deep* and *Daughters of the Dust*. Simultaneously, adopting Wardi's ecocritical perspective in approaching water's semiotics, will contribute to the overarching wake work methodology whereby a practice of decolonisation can

be observed. Ecocriticism is repositioned as a technique essential to understanding African Diasporic livelihood.

In summary, Decoloniality is a broad methodological practice for understanding and resisting the continuation of colonial structures within present day society which expands over many subcategories. It is necessary for my thesis topic - *Water, memory, maternity within African Diasporic Fiction*, to adopt a theoretical framework which enables an intersectional analysis of fictions which are so complex in their presentation of ecology, motherhood, memory, gender and race.

3. Chapter One: Reconfiguring Partus Sequitur Ventrem

Much of Sharpe's work has focused on how the Middle Passage has colonised Black maternity which, as previously referenced, she addresses through symbolically linking the womb to the slave ship's "hold" (Sharpe 68). The violent expulsion of Africans into the Atlantic Ocean has, for Sharpe, determined the objectification and dismissal of Black motherhood in 21st century society. She writes "The birth canal of Black women or women who birth blackness, then, is another kind of domestic Middle Passage" (74). "We see that mother doesn't mean "mother," but "felon" and "defender" and/or "birther of terror" (77). Through the Middle Passage, water is thus historically linked to the oppression and eradication of Black maternity. Sharpe notes a continuation of this symbolism through watery motifs which persist to function within discourses which marginalise black bodies: "Black women and children continue to be cast as less-than-human victims and agents of "natural" disasters, whether in the aftermath of the 2010 Haitian earthquake, a boat sinking during a perilous journey, or Hurricane Katrina" (79).

In *The Deep*, *Beloved* and *Daughters of the Dust*, the womb is disconnected from the violence of Partus Sequitur Ventrem through reimagined images of oceans, islands and rivers. Longyan Wang notes that while such water bodies have existed as sites of pain within African Diasporic memory, they are simultaneously the perfect analogy for redefining and "reclaiming" Black "history" as water is inherently maternal (Wang 354). Research has shown that the amniotic waters (the fluid which surrounds the foetus in the womb) are 99% the same as the properties

which make up sea water. “A foetus in its mother’s womb is certainly alive in an aquatic environment” (Drexciya qtd Wang 350). This symbolically poses the crucial question as to whether humans have the capacity to adapt to living underwater. In the context of the Middle Passage, where “pregnant Americabound African slaves were thrown overboard by the thousands during labour for being sick and disruptive cargo,” is it possible that “they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air?” (Drexciya qtd. in Wang 350). This is the question Rivers Solomon poses in their novella *The Deep* which imagines an oceanic community of mermaids birthed from pregnant slave women who were thrown overboard during the transatlantic crossing.

3.1. The Ocean

Anissa J Wardi’s notion of the ocean existing as a “floating graveyard” within the Diasporic “expressive tradition” is reconfigured in Solomon’s *The Deep* (6,8). The inevitable connection between birth and death observed by Sharpe is obstructed, and the horrors of bodies forcibly entering the water, becomes, for Solomon, the beginning of a new story- one of cultural reclamation and mythological reinvention. This begins with redefining the ocean as a source of life: a metaphorical womb. At this very point where death, decay and erasure seem inevitable, a new creation story is born. The Wajinru, meaning ‘chorus of the Deep,’ are the half fish, half human community at the centre of Solomon’s novel. Their communal practices are centred around remembering their origin story which is conveyed to the mermaid society through the historian Yetu. Her cultural role is to harbour and transmit the memory of their creation. Yetu recounts this story to the reader:

One day we are swimming but a few feet down from the surface in pleasantly cool waters, when there’s a plop above, a struggle causing the water to stir, and then a sinking. The surface dweller is in our arms, heart still beating, but we are too far from any land for us to think of dragging it to an island. It is unconscious, and its belly is round with child. [...] Then the surface dwellers legs begin to splay apart, and we come under it. We see it: the head. Our eyes widen, struck. It is not a two-legs head. There are fins at the centre of its back, on its sides and at its front. Hairless. And darker than any land creature. [...] What magic has intervened to transform this pup in the womb? Was it the ocean itself? The progenitor of all life? (Solomon 58,59,60)

In this passage describing the birth of the Wajinru pup, the ocean has become an extension of the womb. The ocean and the womb are described by Yetu through similar language whereby their functions become intertwined and unanimous. The ocean ensures the continuation of the foetus' life, allowing it to grow and transform. Such a connection between womb and ocean can be seen most overtly through Yetu's rhetorical questioning 'in the womb? Was it the ocean itself?', where the womb and the ocean are equated in their potential to create and preserve this new life. Yetu also declares the ocean as the 'progenitor of all life' which defines the ocean as inherently maternal. Gaston Bachelard has noted that the ocean cannot be separated from maternity because "water swells seeds and causes springs to gush forth. Water is a substance that we see everywhere springing up and increasing. The spring is an irresistible birth, a continuous birth"(14). Bachelard's assertions are present here and the birth and transformation of the Wajinru pup defines the ocean as an amniotic site. The invention of this creation story by Solomon detaches the ocean from the slave ship and therefore separates the womb from "the hold" (Sharpe 21). The ocean, a site which Wardi acknowledges "calls us to remember the millions who endured the enforced physical crossing over the moving waters of the Atlantic" is renegotiated by Solomon whereby African memory and history can be redefined and the inevitable channel of birth to death in the statute of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* can be discontinued and reimagined (6).

This maternalised creation myth is also radical in the way that it reconceives belonging and heritage within African Diasporic memory, specifically pertaining to African American identities. It is well documented in the field of postcolonial and decolonial studies that to be African American is to come from a history of unknown displacement, with the slave trade erasing localised African heritage. Eyerman writes "The notion of African American is not itself a natural category, but an historically formed collective identity.[...] It was here in this identity-formation, that the memory of slavery would be central, not so much as individual experience, but as collective memory. It was slavery, whether or not one had experienced it, that defined one's identity as an African American" (76,77). In other words, African American history and heritage is defined by the presence of slavery with their native African roots being erased by the transatlantic crossing. Solomon's allegory resists such colonisation. By creating a mythos which offers an alternative mode of identity, origin and existence through the creation of

a Black mermaid community, Solomon is providing a counternarrative to the brutality of the Middle Passage, resisting the slave trade and therefore the erasure of Black identity and heritage. The birth of the Wanjiru symbolically preserves African lineage and offers a future generation which is not defined by colonial systems of oppression. Colonial displacement therefore is resisted, and a reimagined Black society is born. In the context of Solomon's writing, 'that which is brought forth' is the birth of a new beginning for Black identities. The Atlantic becomes redefined as a maternal site which transmits and transforms African Diasporic memory, retelling and defining history outside the constraints of a colonial paradigm.

3.1.1 Water is an element which remembers the dead

- DeLoughrey, *Heavy Waters* 704

Throughout *In The Wake*, Sharpe reiterates Édouard Glissant's sentiment that "This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. [...] The belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld" (73). Within Diasporic memory here, Black identity is encased within a chasm of decay and the ocean becomes this 'nonworld,' a blackhole where everything is lost. The act of cultural remembering therefore becomes one of horror and despair where Black communities are constantly faced with narratives of death and erasure, predetermining their birth and existence. Solomon further resists this practice of remembering through, once again, rebuilding a different semiotic relationship between the womb and the ocean. In this passage below, Yetu cannot distinguish between the amniotic waters of the womb and the ocean itself, which become intertwined as a site of gestation and rejuvenation. Solomon writes:

"I'm trying to remember something," said Yetu.

"What," her Amaba asked.

"What it was like to be in the womb." [...]

"Do you have memories of Darkness?" Said Amaba [...]

"Of course."

"All I am saying," said Amaba "is there is very little difference between a bornt Wajinru pup and one still encased in the womb. What if some of your rememberings of dark loneliness as a pup were you inside a belly, and it was hardly distinguishable from floating in the deep? It is all waters."

Yetu circled her mother slowly. "It is all waters. When I think about rememberings I've had, I believe this to be the case. I remember the womb from the first Wajinru. I remember the ocean teaching us to breathe water. Once we were born, it would've been

too late, but in the womb, it came to us naturally. That is why it changed us then.” (149,150)

This encounter between Amaba (Yetu’s Wajinru mother) and Yetu demonstrates that within Wajinru memory, the womb and the ocean are so interwoven, that it is difficult to tell the difference between being ‘inside the belly’ and ‘floating in the deep.’ They become one amniotic site where belonging and protection take place. The ocean becomes personified into a maternal body here through the phrase ‘I remember the ocean teaching us to breathe water.’ The act of teaching entrusts the ocean with wisdom, care and duty, qualities one would associate with a parent or an elder, while the word ‘breathing,’ indicates the continuation of life, simultaneously disconnecting the ocean from associations of death. Earlier in the novel Yetu states, “The ocean made us. Therefore it will take care of us [...] we must simply call on it,” which further constructs the ocean as a maternal site, caring for and creating the Wajinru (138). It is also significant here that this discussion of the womb’s relationship to the ocean happens between a mother and a daughter. The way in which cultural narratives of memory are created and negotiated are through acts of matrilineal transmission. Amaba says ‘It is all waters’ and directly afterwards Yetu repeats ‘It is all waters.’ Yetu’s mirroring of her mother here signifies the passing down of cultural memory to be something constructed and transferred through the relationship between mother and daughter. As well as the ocean becoming personified as a maternal body, history and culture are perceived through a matriarchal lens, resisting the patriarchal underpinnings of colonial historical narratives. By once again redefining the ocean through allusions to the womb, a new memory practice is put forth, a practice of reimagining which detaches the act of remembering from the inevitability of eradication and destruction. It is important to note that such reimagination neither denies nor ignores the reality of pregnant women dying upon entering the water. It, however, offers a historical counter narrative where a life and legacy continues and a Diasporic mythology can be reclaimed. As DeLoughrey states, “water is an element which remembers the dead” and this is true for Solomon, who remembers her ancestors by reconfiguring the depiction of the ocean within Black history as a site of rebirth where history, culture and identity can be reconceived (704).

By depicting the ocean through amniotic semiosis, Solomon has simultaneously engaged with Sharpe’s practice of wake work, while further challenging and expanding the ideas put forth in *In*

The Wake: On Blackness and Being. Solomon has “ruptured the episteme” via a process of reimagining the ocean through symbols of maternity (Sharpe 18). In addition, Diasporic memory has been reconfigured, while the notion of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* has concurrently been redefined. The womb is recentred as a source of life and that which is brought forth is a new identity where a reclaiming of history and autonomy can take place. Sharpe notes that wake work involves “remember[ing] the dead” through a process which is separate from “melancholia and mourning” (Sharpe 19). Solomon achieves exactly this through the creation of the Wajinru people, offering the continuation of a legacy which was lost through the Middle Passage.

3.2. The River

As well as the Atlantic Ocean, rivers are also symbolically encoded within African diasporic memory. In African American history specifically, courses such as the Mississippi river came to represent both the potential for freedom and the continuation of exploitation. Buchanan has noted, “The steamboats that moved up and down the Mississippi carried the tentacles of slavery and racism, but they also carried liberating ideas and pathways to freedom” (5). Like the Mississippi, The Ohio river is another significant watercourse in African American history. After 1804, it became the boundary which separated the Northern states, where slavery had been abolished, from the Southern states where harsh slavery legislation persisted. Wardi has noted that for African people trapped in the Antebellum South, “the river was a bridge to freedom” and was thus used as an “escape route” for fugitives (64). It has therefore become a symbol of “redemption” within the African American expressive tradition, a “journey of deliverance” (Wardi 65).

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison’s depiction of the Ohio river is rooted in this historical context and can be analysed as another example of how *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* is renegotiated by Diasporic writers. It is in the Ohio river that Sethe gives birth to her daughter Denver. She is helped by a “white woman” named Amy (Morrison 109). Unlike *The Deep*, where historical reimaginings take place through supernatural reinvention, *Beloved* is contextually rooted in historical realism where the evils of slavery are very much established as the novel’s backdrop. Within the context of Denver’s birth story, we meet a heavily pregnant Sethe who has escaped from “Sweet Home” Plantation (Morrison 8). Denver’s birth into the river symbolises the potential for a new life, one

different from Sethe's. The hope for this generational transition begins when Sethe's amniotic waters merge with the waters of the Ohio river. Morrison writes:

As soon as Sethe got close to the river, her own water broke loose to join it. The break, followed by the redundant announcement of labour, arched her back. [...] Sethe couldn't think of anywhere to go but in. She waited for the sweet beat that followed the blast of pain. On her knees again, she crawled into the boat. It waddled under her and she had just enough time to brace her leaf-bag feet on the bench when another rip took her breath away. Panting under four summer stars, she threw her legs over the sides, because here come the head, Amy informed her as though she didn't know it— as the rip was a breakup of walnut logs in the brace, or of lightning's jagged tear through a leather sky. [...] And the strong hands went to work a fourth time, none too soon, for river water, seeping through any hole it chose, was spreading over Sethe's hips. She reached one arm back and grabbed the rope while Amy fairly clawed at the head. When a foot rose from the river bed and kicked the bottom of the boat and Sethe's behind, she knew it was done and permitted herself a small faint. (107,108)

Here, Sethe's womb and the river converge to become one maternal water body. The opening sentences of this passage also suggest a human instinctiveness to embrace water in times of acute maternal vulnerability. If, as Bachelard has suggested, there is little difference between amniotic waters and the earth's natural watercourses, then Sethe, unable to "think of anywhere to go but in," indicates a return to a metaphoric womb, one which can protect her, as well as preserve the life of her fast approaching child. This is further illustrated in Denver's moment of birth. Sethe knows her labour is 'done' when 'a foot rose from the river bed and kicked the bottom of the boat.' The arrival of Denver here is described as if she has been delivered from the river itself. The river bed and the birth canal become intertwined where, by the end of the labour, any distinction between Sethe's womb and the Ohio river become obscured. Wardi has noted that such imagery must be read as a symbolic "baptism, underscoring river water as healing, renewing, and, most significantly, transformative" (66). The Ohio marks the potential for "a new beginning for Sethe and her family" (66). Wardi's analysis can be pushed further in the context of renegotiating *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*. Not only does the merging of Sethe's waters and the Ohio define the river as maternal, but also, the significance of the birth taking place in this politicised site, resists the oppressive origin of "that which is brought forth follows the womb" (Sharpe 15). Unlike in *The Deep*, where Solomon offers the possibility to reimagine matrilineal inheritance as something separate from the legacy of slavery, such total reimaginings cannot be achieved in this context. What Morrison does make possible, however, is for the inheritance of

slavery as an identity to be discontinued. The Ohio river functioning as the symbolic womb, signifies, like Wardi has noted, “new life” (66). Denver being birthed in the river demonstrates a reclaiming and rebirth of identity, one which is detached from the colonised “birth canal” as argued by Sharpe (74). Sharpe acknowledges that slavery turned “the womb into a factory producing blackness as abjection” and therefore children into “non/status, non/being-ness” (74). Through the maternalised symbolism of the Ohio river, Morrison disrupts this trajectory, and returns status and autonomy to Denver, simultaneously restoring a mother/ daughter connection between Denver and Sethe which is not defined through “property relations” (Sharpe 77).

The semiotic function of the river simultaneously reinstates the title of ‘mother’ back to Sethe. Sharpe’s research has shown that a woman “who births blackness” is labelled as a “non/former/un mother” because “they are held in the body of the state” (74). Morrison’s river imagery resists this reality. “Nothing is safe from being changed by water” writes Marks, and we can see that the symbolic waters of the Ohio ‘changes’ the status of Sethe’s womb (Marks 25). Sethe’s womb becomes connected to these emancipatory waters through her submerged labour. She becomes symbolically freed from the “body of the state” where her own body and identity as a mother is reclaimed. Sethe does end up mothering Denver as a free woman and thus the symbolism of the Ohio river is foreshadowing of a possible future.

It is important at this point in my thesis to issue a reminder regarding definitions of freedom in the context of 19th century America. While carrying out work which argues and observes narratives of reimagining and redefinition, it is essential that such analysis does not simultaneously partake in the erasure of an already dismissed historical reality. Notions of freedom therefore must be defined through language which honours the social context. In the work: *Gender Resistance: women, slavery and the legacy of Margaret Garner*, Walters and Fredrickson have been clear in acknowledging that for Black women during this period, obtaining freedom, “was not an easy path. In the nineteenth century, gaining freedom was not a guarantee of sustainable freedom or even the wherewithal to physically survive” (142). Walters and Fredrickson further observe that “the lack of economic opportunities upon becoming free can mean having access to even less” (142). This “can include less food and even worse shelter than in conditions of slavery” (142). It is evident that an absence of infrastructure for African

Americans prevailed in the northern states and therefore, to acquire freedom simply meant to live outside the control of a slaveholder. It is this definition of freedom that Sethe and Denver finally obtain.

In addition to this symbolism, Sethe's labour into the Ohio river also facilitates a radical interracial interaction. Amy Denver, a "whitegirl" from Boston helps Sethe deliver her baby, and the way in which Morrison describes this exchange, dismantles racial power dynamics (Morrison 100). Amy takes on the role of midwife during Sethe's birthing. Amy's "strong hands went to work/ Coming to, she (Sethe) heard no cries, just Amy's encouraging coos/ Amy wrapped her skirt around it (the baby) and the wet sticky women clambered ashore" (Morrison 108). Amy supports Sethe here and through her midwifery duties, she participates in ensuring the continuation of Sethe's life as well as her baby's. More significantly, however, is the way in which Morrison describes their interaction after Sethe's labour. Morrison writes:

On a riverbank in the cool of a summer evening two women struggled under a shower of silvery blue. They never expected to see each other again in this world and at the moment couldn't care less. But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something appropriately and well. A pateroller passing would have sniggered to see two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws– a slave and a barefoot white woman with unpinned hair– wrapping a ten minute old baby in the rags they wore. But no pateroller came and no preacher. The water sucked and swallowed itself beneath them. There was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well. (109)

Morrison presents a congruence between Sethe and Amy here which is first and foremost established through the pronoun 'they'. Semantically, 'they,' is frequently used to "other" a person or a community, distinguishing *them* from *us* (Spivak 247). Here, Morrison uses 'they', to unify both women, who have, up until this point, been linguistically separated by their different identities: Amy, the "whitegirl" and Sethe the "slavewoman" (Morrison 100,101). Through this semantic unification, Sethe and Amy become equals, and this is emphasised further through Morrison's description of the labour. The phrase 'they did something appropriately and well' is repeated twice. The phrase not only establishes a sense of partnership and cooperation between Sethe and Amy but the words 'appropriately' and 'well' are functional in their description. They indicate a sense of progress and practicality and we can infer, act as a social metaphor for Morrison. This fleeting moment presents a tableau for what life could be

outside the constraints of harsh racial legislations. Morrison offers no euphoria in this metaphor but instead puts forth an image of integration which is effective and collaborative. It is profound in its normalcy. Denver's birth in itself marks a symbolic birth, the birth of this interracial social potential. The barriers erected by antebellum society disintegrate on the banks of the Ohio river which becomes further defined as a site of freedom and transformation through this interaction.

These various symbolic and literal births which take place in the Ohio river are all encapsulated within Morrison's metaphoric allusions to bluefern. The plant comes to represent birth and future freedom, but such themes are only described through fleeting images. Morrison writes:

Spores of bluefern growing in the hollows along the riverbank float toward the water in silver- blue lines hard to see unless you are near them, lying right at the river's edge when the sunshots are low and drained. Often they are mistook for insects– but they are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. And for a moment it is easy to believe each one has one– will become all of what is contained in the spore: will live out its days as planned. This moment of certainty lasts no longer than that; longer, perhaps, than the spore itself. (108)

Wardi had observed that the “fertilisation” of bluefern “occurs in water” and thus the floating spores along the riverbank memorialise the Ohio river as a site of rebirth, a symbolic maternal body (Wardi 66). These spores furthermore come to represent Sethe and Denver's predicament as well as the relationship between Sethe and Amy. Just like the spore, there is the possibility for growth, change and transformation for Amy, Sethe and Denver, but it exists only as potential. The literal and symbolic births which take place on the banks of the Ohio river become the ‘spores’ of hope for a different future, the potential for connection between people of different races, and a life of freedom for Sethe and Denver. With this potential, however, comes uncertainty, and this is an important observation within the social context Morrison establishes. Potential is not tangible, “this moment of certainty lasts no longer than that,” a moment (Morrison 108). While initially this imagery appears to underscore this instance in a tone of melancholia, Morrison's depiction of potential and hope still creates a counternarrative to the horrors of slavery, where hope for a changed future could not be imagined. By situating birth, both literally and symbolically within a fluid body of water constantly in motion, such hope can

be transported and transmitted, and the potential for Black identities to be reborn and redefined can be reimagined.

Morrison's symbolic depiction of the Ohio river in *Beloved* becomes inherently intertwined with themes of maternity and birth. Morrison encodes the river water with a double meaning. The ever flowing nature of the river is changed by the release of Sethe's amniotic waters in which it becomes an extension of her womb. Simultaneously, the river water and its emancipatory symbolism alters Black maternity, freeing the womb from colonial control and redefining Partus Sequitur Ventrem. The Ohio river therefore becomes memorialised as a site of hope where the potential for change and transition can be transmitted. Water cannot be controlled, it is a vessel for freedom.

3.3. The Sea Islands

A terrain which is frequently excluded from conversation surrounding the intersection between water and African Diasporic memory are the Sea Islands. Janine Wardi offers an informative study on the significance of this terrain in Black Diasporic imagination, both symbolically and geographically. Wardi has noted that during the transatlantic slave trade, these "Atlantic landscapes" would have "constituted, for many, the first American landscape for Africans in bondage" (34). She writes: "Off the shores of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, the Sea Islands, numbering over one hundred, are limned as ancestral geographies in African American literature. [...] Not only were enslaved peoples brought to the islands during the years of the legal slave trade, but even after such trade was outlawed, the navigable ocean recesses of the islands and the turbulent rivers leading miles into the interior facilitated the landing of slaves brought directly from Africa" (34,35). Because of this, slavery practices on the Sea islands continued after their abolishment on the mainland in 1865. Wardi has acknowledged that due to the islands' tempestuous climate, common practice was for the "white plantation owners" to live on the mainland, leaving "the plantations daily operation to others" (34). This meant that "Africans on the islands—who far outnumbered the whites—had a greater degree of freedom in exercising indigenous practices" and therefore, after plantation owners permanently deserted the islands, "the Sea Islanders maintained some vestiges of a West African way of life on American soil" (34).

Daughter of the Dust by Julie Dash is a film which explores this complex history. The film is centred around the Peazant family, who live on “Dahtaw Island (Gullah for Daughter) off the South Carolina/Georgia coast” (Machiorlatti 102). Narratively, the film follows the Peazant family’s last supper before they migrate to the mainland. Thematically, the film explores issues of Diasporic identity, heritage, lineage and history which are symbolically mapped on to the geography of the island. Dash personifies Dahtaw island as a metaphorical womb and it is through this symbolism and the interrogation of the relationship between characters Eli and Eula, Nana Peazant and the unborn child, that Partus Sequitur Ventrem is renegotiated.

3.3.1. They’re all the same, the ancestors and the womb

-Dash, *Daughters of The Dust* 00:19:31

Eli, the great grandson of the Matriarch Nana Peazant, and Eula are expecting their first baby together, that baby being the Unborn Child who narrates the film. We find out that Eula was raped by a white slave owner and this trauma is relayed to Nana Peazant through Eli who is troubled by the possibility that the child is not his. Eli introduces the audience to what Wardi notes as “multiple narratives of colonisation” (46). Sharpe’s notion of the colonised birth canal is depicted through this rape, black maternity thus becoming a product of “the belly of the state” (Sharpe 74). Simultaneously, a narrative of Black erasure is established through “this historically entrenched form of abuse”, one which Eli projects onto the island (46). Eli exclaims that because of what has happened to his wife “I have to leave here, I don’t have no other choice” (*Daughters of the Dust* 00:22:03). Such a statement links the island with his wife’s womb. Dahtaw island is personified as maternal here and such violation of the maternal body becomes synonymous with colonising the island, Eli’s home. His sense of identity becomes a product of colonial history. Nana Peazant, however, emancipates Eli from this reality. She puts forth a West African history and mythology which counteracts colonial discourse, detaching the womb from the state and returning a sense of belonging to Eli and the rest of the Peazant family. Nana says: “You won’t have no baby that wasn’t sent to you, the ancestors and the womb, they’re one, they’re the same. Those in the grave, like those who’re across the sea, they’re with us, they’re all the same, the

ancestors and the womb. Call on your ancestors Eli. Let them guide” (*Daughters of the Dust* 00:19:29-00:19:56).

The womb here, firstly, is connected to an image of African destiny. African heritage, lineage and belonging are recentred by Nana as a predetermined inevitability, thus counteracting colonial practices of erasure and eradication. Secondly, connecting “the womb” to ‘those in the grave’ and ‘those who’re across the sea,’ resurrects and immortalises those lost under slavery, simultaneously uniting the geographical schism of African heritage and culture brought about by the Middle Passage. ‘They’re one and the same’ utters Nana, and thus the womb becomes memorialised as a site of African preservation, where West African culture and heritage can be reclaimed and reproduced. Moreover, linking the womb and the children it brings forth to ancestral guidance usurps Partus Sequitur Ventrem. That which is brought forth is an African identity which exists outside of colonial control. The womb as ‘the hold’ is dismantled.

As Nana Peazant delivers this monologue, the camera transports the audience to the Island’s shoreline. Close up images of the sand and the lapping seawater are relayed to the viewer in a slow motion montage, while female members of the Peazant family encircle Eula and dance around her in a ring formation. Layers of amniotic metaphor are established here by Dash, which indicate synonymy between the island, the ancestors and the womb. They become memorialised as one entity. The waters surrounding Dahtaw island, lapping at its shore, are mimicked in the encircling of pregnant Eula. In both images, a metaphoric womb is established. The ocean waters protect Dahtaw island just as the women protect Eula and her unborn daughter. The island is transformed into a maternal body, preserving and transmitting African lineage and heritage.

If the island and its waters are personified as the womb, then, as Nana Peazant determines, they must also represent the ancestors. This intersection of memory and maternity is most overtly established through Eula’s recounting of the Igbo legend which is mapped onto the island’s inland waters. The Igbo legend is conceptualised in African American history as one of the most profound and grotesque tales of resistance. The legend tells of a “mass suicide of Igbo slaves that occurred in 1803 on St. Simons Island, Georgia. As the story goes, a group of Igbo slaves revolted and took control of their slave ship, grounded it on an island, and rather than submit to

slavery, proceeded to march into the water while singing in Igbo, drowning themselves in turn” (Owunna). In *Daughters of the Dust*, Dahtaw Island is imagined as this very site and the cultural memory of this event is told to the audience by Eula:

It was here they brought them. They took them out the boats right here where we stand. Nobody remember how many of them it was but there was a good few according to my great gran. [...] The ship had just come from the deep water. It was a great old ship with sails. The minute those Ibo were bright ashore, they just stop and take a look around, not saying a word, just studying the place real good. And they see things that you and I don't have power to see. Well they'd seen just about everything, the slavery time, the war my grandmother always talk about. [...] When they got through sizing up the place real good and seeing what was to come, my grandmother said they turned, all of them, and walked back into the water, every last man, woman and child. You wouldn't think they'd get very far seeing it was water they were walking on. Had all that iron upon them, upon their ankles and their wrists, and fastened around their neck like dog collars. But chains didn't stop those Ibo none. They just keep walking, like the water was solid ground. When they got to where the ship was, they didn't so much give it a look. Just walked past it because they knew they was going home. (1:14:53-1:17:46)

The surrounding waters of Dahtaw island become a memorial site for the Igbo ancestors. While the horrors of the middle passage are alluded to through images of the ‘great old ship with sails’ from the ‘deep water,’ Eula transforms the waters of Dahtaw island into sacred terrain. She does this through allusion to biblical imagery, with the motif of walking on water, embodying the ancestors with omnipotent powers. Adding to this, the island waters are referred to as ‘home,’ and thus a subversive image of reclaiming is put forth, with the mass suicide redefining the American island as a memorialised African landscape. In addition to this, the accompanying visuals further immortalise the waters and simultaneously connect them to the womb. Eula’s monologue opens with three still images. One of a statue of an Igbo man floating in the shallows, another of a sign post saying Igbo landing and lastly, one of Eula cradling her pregnant belly (1:14:27-1:15:02). ‘The ancestors and the womb are one and the same’ becomes encapsulated here through this montage. In addition, the waters of Dahtaw island are reclaimed as a site for rebirth and this is conveyed by Eli, who enacts the Igbo legend, reframing it as an instance of baptism. As Eula chronicles the tale, Eli wades into the water and performs a christening on the statue, pouring the island’s water over its head. Eli then returns to Eula and they both engage in a moment of reconciliation, Eli embracing Eula’s pregnant belly. The water here acts as a bridge, allowing Eli to pass symbolically between the Igbo ancestors and the baby in Eula’s womb. The

past and the future converge, water becoming the vessel which connects the ancestors with the Unborn Child.

This “metaphysical” relationship between the ancestors, water and the womb is perhaps most overtly displayed through the Unborn narrator’s moment of conception (Wardi 35). This is conveyed to the audience through a superimposed image of the Unborn Child running from the water near the Igbo statue, into Eula’s belly (*Daughters of the Dust* 1:11: 10- 1:11:28). Frames of the Igbo statue floating in the water in slow motion fade into the shot of the Unborn Child running into Eula’s womb. Not only does this montage narratively epitomise Nana Peazant’s declaration, but the overlapping camera shots also cinematically depict this congruence between Eula’s womb, the island waters and the ancestors.

Water once again becomes maternalised and is memorialised as a vessel which connects history and heritage with the birth of future generations. Such connection recentres the womb as sacred terrain within African Diasporic imagination, disconnecting the birth canal from colonial control. In an interview with Kevin Thomas, Julie Dash asserts that she “wanted to take the African-American experience and rephrase it” (qtd. in Brouwer 5). Dash achieves exactly this within Sharpe’s context of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*, using the fluid terrain of sea islands and its surrounding waters to rewrite ‘that which is brought forth,’ assigning notions of belonging, certainty and reunion to African memory and identity.

Through a close reading of *The Deep* by Rivers Solomon, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, and *Daughters Of The Dust* by Julie Dash, this chapter has demonstrated how water and maternity are intrinsically connected within African Diasporic memory. All three authors engage in a practice of renegotiating historically tumultuous watercourses which are reframed through maternal reimaginings. Such reimagining has detached the womb from the hold, returning it to the African Diasporic identities present in each of the works. This detachment has renegotiated *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* and “disrupted the episteme,” allowing a discourse of African heritage and history to be retold outside of colonial rhetorical norms (Sharpe 18). A practice of wake work, carried out by each author can thus be identified, with water, memory and maternity converging in a process of retelling and reinventing an erased history.

4. Chapter Two: Matriarchal Waters- A Mother Centred Matrix

As I continue to investigate the relationship between water, memory and maternity in African Diasporic fiction, it is integral that this thesis focuses on the ways in which matriarchal social systems are put forth by my chosen authors and how such systems are connected to motifs of water in Diasporic memory. As indicated in my theoretical chapter, Nah Dove offers a cohesive study on matriarchal structures within African cultures and how these function, not as an inversion of patriarchy, but as an alternative societal mode where justice and gender equality can be brought forth. Dove defines this mode as “the Mother -Centred Matrix,” which she elaborates, “literally means mother-led societal and cultural constructs” (6). It is a system of “matrilineal or mother-focussed inheritance” where an “allegiance to the mother” is “required” for “culture” to “remain intact” (12,13). Her study illustrates that, proceeding colonisation, the “Akan” people of Ghana adopted this system. She observes that within Akan culture, a “reciprocal relationship between female and male members” was constructed, thus creating the grounds for a “just society” (6,7). Dove argues that mother-led societies will lead to “reciprocity and balance among the members of society,” whereas “father-led societies seek male centred control over women”(7). According to Dove, this different manifestation of matriarchy/ patriarchy has much to do with how the natural world is inhabited and treated. She writes “the origin of the Mother-Centred Matrix is attributed to an agrarian lifestyle in a climate of abundance, whereas patriarchy is associated with nomadic traditions arising from harsh [urban] environments” (8). As urbanisation and patriarchal structures have become the predominant systems of global social ordering, an inevitable symmetry in the oppressive treatment of women and the natural world has occurred. There is no clearer example of this than the colonisation of the African continent. The destruction of land, the murdering and enslavement of Africans and the elimination of pre colonial matriarchal social systems like that of the Akan people has intersected in a practice of violent oppression and erasure. Dove elaborates: “The conquest of Africa was the conquest of the woman. She, Africa, lies bleeding and debased, and those who remember her are marginalised, becoming extinct” (21).

The Deep, Beloved, and Daughters of The Dust “remember her” (Africa) by engaging in these erased matriarchal practices (Dove 21). In each of the works, systems of patriarchy are

revitalised through watery motifs whereby African ritual and culture are reimagined and a “mother centred matrix” as well as processes of matrilineal transmission are established. Dove asserts that the “balance” and “justice” brought about by the mother centred matrix “is sought” from “the spiritual planes” and this is a theme very much reflected in Solomon's *The Deep* (6).

Ifi Amadiume expands on this. She asserts that Africa’s “matriarchal history” is “manifested in religions of female spirits and goddesses” (170). What perhaps is more interesting in the context of this thesis, is that such spirits are anchored to watercourses within this African mythology. Amadiume notes that the “belief in water spirit[s] is widespread in communities along rivers, creeks, lagoons, oceans and lakes” and has become a more established belief system in “modern African cities” (174). “Idemili” and Oshun are heavily worshipped “river goddesses” in “Nnobi” and Yoruba cultures, as is the ocean goddess “Mammy Water” (170,174). Amadiume demonstrates that “the grounding” of “goddesses in economic, political and religious dialectics” contributed to a pre colonial society that “embodi[ed] female solidarity,” encouraged “collectivist humanism” and “promoted this ideological matriarchy in wider social organisation” (173). The belief in these Goddesses inhabiting watercourses also incentivised cultural respect towards “ecosystems of water” as well as other natural landscapes (174). Amadiume highlights the importance of engaging in a decolonial practice when returning to pre colonial Africa. She writes “Africa can reinvent herself from her own positive cultures and historical achievements, and needs to do so to move forward” (169). Christina Sharpe thoroughly documents that historical discourse maintains “Black people via abjection” because an African history preceding colonisation has been intentionally eradicated from the Euro centric “grand narrative of history” (Sharpe 33). This practice of historical erasure continues to permanently “position” Black identities exclusively within “the afterlife of slavery,” destroying and dismissing a rich African culture which pre-existed (Sharpe 33). Wake work requires, as Amadiume has put forth a process of returning and reinvention, a process Rivers Solomon carries out in *The Deep*, resurrecting precolonial African culture through the construction of a matriarchal ecosystem.

4.1. Remembering *Her* (Africa)

While this thesis has illustrated that the creation of the Wajinru identity functions to reimagine a future which counteract the horrors of the Middle Passage, in the context of the work put forth by Nah Dove and Ifi Amadiume, there is a second possibility. Solomon's depiction of the Wajinru reflects the mythological images of these matriarchal spirits. Amadiume has noted that "In West Africa, it is generally claimed that these spirits [...] are very beautiful, assuming various human shapes, but manifest particularly as half- woman and half-fish, like mermaids" (140). Amadiume discusses the Goddess Mammy Water as an example. She writes "Mammy Water is represented as an enchanting, naked, beautiful woman who can be seen combing her long hair sitting on a rock in the sea or on the shores" (140). Not only does this half fish, half human identity embody the anatomy of the Wajinru, this mythological representation of the water goddess combing her hair is also a recurring motif for Yetu when she engages in "the remembrance" (Solomon 19). The remembrance ceremony is a seasonal ritual where Yetu transmits "all of the generations' memories" to the Wajinru community (Davies 251). Unlike Yetu who is chronically burdened by cultural memory, the rest of the Wajinru hold no memory of the past at all. Thus, the remembrance ceremony functions as a temporary portal into their cultural history. Prior to the remembering ceremony, Yetu is given a gift:

It was a comb, a tool used for styling hair, Yetu flowed from remembering to remembering. She could only find three combs in her memory. The one in her fin didn't seem to be one of them, but its origin was clear. It had belonged to one of the foremothers. Yetu stared at the face of the woman in her remembering, [...] preserved by the iciness of the deep. She was heart-stilling and strange, her beauty magnetic. Yetu couldn't look away, not even when she felt someone shaking her. (Solomon 17,18)

Yetu's vision here echoes the depictions of the Goddess matriarchs. For Yetu, the comb becomes synonymous with images of African female beauty which are 'preserved' within the ocean waters. The images that Yetu recalls: her fin, the ocean, the comb and feminine beauty are fragments which seem to piece together a portrait of Amadiume's portrayal of Mammy Water. The 'foremother' and the water Goddess become intertwined identities in this moment, and while Yetu's rememberings are often plagued with darkness and suffering, a precolonial history and belief system is remembered and recentred. At the beginning of the novel, Yetu's rememberings regarding a history which predates the Middle Passage are often splintered and

obscure. By the end of the novel, however, this image of the comb provides a moment of historical clarity for Yetu and her mother Amaba, a moment where spiritual and geographical belonging are returned to the Wajinru's sense of identity.

Amaba had markings on her face, these beautiful, intricate tattoos. Some of the symbols were identical to etchings on the comb I received shortly before the last remembrance. One of the offerings made to me. I'd assumed they were bite marks, but of course, they are not. They were intentional carvings. I misinterpreted.

"It is easy to do that with the past, even with the blessing of the full visions of history," said Amaba.

Yetu showed the comb. "Does it spark anything for you? A location?"

Amamba held the comb in her front fin and rubbed it with closed eyes. "Its from a song"

"What" asked Yetu

[...]

Amaba began to sing "Zoti aleyu, zoti aleyu, watsa tibi m'besha tusa keyu?"

Strange fish, strange fish, why do you jump around in my belly like a fish out of water?" (151)

The comb becomes a symbol of precolonial history which connects the present and future Wajinru with the African mythology of the past. The folk style song that is remembered through Amaba's touching of the comb, brings about images of the Wajinru as well as allusions to Goddesses such as Mammy water. The comb, as discussed, is an integral component to Mammy Water's mythological image, as is her half fish, half human form. This intersection encoded in the comb's remembrance, is indicative of the Wajinru existing in the image of these matriarchal African Deities. Such symbolism dismantles the notion of "Blackness" being seen exclusively through a gaze of "abjection," and instead metaphorically reframes diaspora as divine (Sharpe 33). This interpretation can be further identified in Yetu's observation regarding her mother's face. 'These beautiful, intricate tattoos' are 'identical to etchings on the comb.' Symbolic motifs attached to Matriarchal Goddesses are mapped onto the Wajinru's skin, once again connecting them with divine image. A powerful allegory is offered here. By connecting the Wajinru with spiritual systems of Africa's pre colonial past, Solomon is able to not only resist abjection, but is also able to resurrect an erased history which is centred around matriarchal beliefs. Solomon thus raises awareness for cultural, social and spiritual systems which prospered prior to colonisation's hijacking of historical discourse.

4.1.1 A Matriarchal Ecosystem

In addition to the exploration of matriarchy through allusion to African water deities, Solomon builds a matriarchal ecosystem for the Wajinru to inhabit. Solomon achieves this through reimagining the ocean wildlife, whereby this system of reciprocation, established in Dove's scholarship, is found between the Wajinru and the ocean creatures. In *The Deep*, whales become integral to the continuation of Wajinru society as well as rearing and taking care of their young. Through this relationship, we see Solomon construct a matriarchy which is rooted in a practice of ecological feminism. This must be understood before a symbolic reading of this relationship is undertaken. Just as Dove acknowledges that "the conquest of Africa was the conquest of the woman," ecofeminism recognises that practices of racial and gender marginalisation are acutely attached to how we conceptualise and treat the natural world (21). The ecofeminist vision is a world where "there is no hierarchy, among humans or between humans and animals, where people care for one another and for nature, where the earth and the forest retain their mystery, power and wholeness, where the power of technology and of military and economic force does not rule the earth" (Plumwood 7). Ecofeminism proclaims that equality for all human beings can only be fully achieved when our oceans, forests, and other natural landscapes and wildlife are respected and nurtured. Solomon realises this aspiration through the social relationship between whales and the Wajinru. Yetu informs us:

We live only by the graciousness of the second mothers, the giant water beasts we've years and years later come to call skalu, whales, who feed us, bond with us, and drag us down to the deepest depths where we are safer. Sperm whales, blue whales, whales that are now extinct, whales so rare there are only one or two of their kind. We live among them, they, our only kin. (Solomon 42/43)

Yetu details a balanced congruence between the Wajinru and these large water mammals. This is displayed through Yetu's choice of verbs and nouns. Words such as "graciousness, bond, among, kin" function to not only curate a sense of respect and equality amongst the different species, but also illustrate the Wajinru's feelings of honour and privilege towards being able to live in the company of such "beautiful" creatures (Solomon 51). Secondly, the whales are also encoded with matriarchal and maternal responsibility. Not only does Yetu refer to them as "mothers," but they also appear to take on the duty of feeding, bonding and protecting the Wajinru, actions

connoting maternal rearing. Dove's notion that "the family in the [mother centred] matrix seeks reciprocal relationship[s]" within society is reflected here (Dove 7). The relationship between the Wajinru and the whales metaphorically demonstrates that mothering is a shared duty within their society, not an exclusively gendered role. It echoes the importance of recentering mothering into the heart of society, where it functions as a system to promote equality, not enforce marginalisation. This shared duty in Solomon's matriarchal ecosystem is a recurring motif. We see this reciprocal relationship between the whales and the Wajinru exist as an essential component to the preservation of Wajinru life. Solomon writes:

The whale, a few measures away, opens its mouth. Inside, there are pups, pups that look like miniature versions of us. Little zoti aleyu. Strange fish. We gasp. We are outside of our body. We wonder if the blue whale devoured us and we are dead, and this is the after life, a world of dreams. [...] It is kind. These little zoti aleyu are not gifts, and the whale did not come looking for us but it recognises that we are one kind. "Welcome!" we say, gathering the pups, six in all, stretching our fins out to pull them into the fold of our body. Having never been with child, we are without milk. How will we feed them? [...] We ask the whale, a mix of shriek and song using mouth shapes not dissimilar to what the surface dwellers used. The whale hums. Again we do not understand, but it stays with us. We're not sure how much longer it can lurk in the deep before needing to return to the surface to breathe. [...] The whale has collected them, has been taking care of them, and it plays with them even now. It won't abandon them. It will continue to give the milk we don't have to the youngest among them. (51,52)

Again, mothering is displayed as a system of distribution which functions to achieve equality. The whales and the Wajinru 'recognise' that 'they are one kind' and work together to create and maintain their society. They acknowledge how each of their species can contribute to the welfare and growth of the Wajinru young, with each duty being discussed in equal language. The Wajinru protect their young, 'pulling them into the folds of their body,' just as the whales provide 'milk'. Yetu states that the whales 'play with them even now' which is indicative of mothering being an enjoyable act. The distribution of roles allows this. The burden of mothering as an individualised role is dismantled and instead, a society based on communal responsibility is put forth. Nah Dove's assertion of a 'mother centred matrix' is achieved here whereby mothering is centralised within Solomon's oceanic society. By constructing this matriarchal framework through an ecological metaphor, Solomon has radicalised motherhood itself. Motherhood is no longer usurped and defined by patriarchy and is instead redefined as a process of cultural unification. In addition to this, presenting a system of matriarchy through depictions

of the ocean's wildlife demonstrates the ecofeminist necessity for the natural world to be respected in order for social equality to be reached.

We once again see how Solomon conceptualises the ocean as a site of redefinition and radicalisation. By rooting her imagined society in images of precolonial water Goddesses as well as African matriarchal social systems, a process of reclamation is once more achieved. The ocean is no longer shackled to the Middle Passage within Diasporic memory and is instead renegotiated as a site where Africa's rich history and culture prior to colonisation can be celebrated and preserved. Returning to and remembering pre-colonial Africa as Solomon has done here, also illustrates a radical and alternative mode of living where maternity, gender and the natural world intersect in a process of emancipation.

4.2. A Matriarchal Micro Climate

Similarly to *The Deep*, the Sea Islands in *Daughters of the Dust* are configured as a spatial mother centred matrix. West African culture and custom is preserved and transmitted through matriarchal practices which not only centralise Black women within historical discourse, but also ensure the continuation of pre colonial tradition. Much scholarship surrounding the film has focussed on the matriarch of the family Nana Peazant, and how memory, culture and community remain intact through her overseeing of the island. While this observation possesses truth, a more intriguing angle displayed by Dash, is how the transmission of heritage and culture is carried out through a plurality of matriarchal voices, which all contribute to a unified narrative of historical preservation. Machiorlatti has explored this observation. She writes "In Julie Dash's cinema aesthetic, multiple character narrators work as multiple voices and as a unifying matrifocal, ancestral voice. Matrifocal orientation indicates a community"(104). This community is centred around women, with men occupying a peripheral space. Brauerer has noted that Dash "simply points her camera in a different direction. She redefines the centre" (6). In historical discourse, this centre has always been a site of eurocentric, white patriarchy. In *Daughters of the Dust*, however, female centred Blackness occupies this space with white history being pushed to the margin. We see this renegotiation manifest geographically. Mainland America is absent from the film's aesthetic and only exists as a verbal allusion. Dahtaw Island, however, is the exclusive location of the film and Dash redefines it as the centre. The name itself is indicative of a

matriarchal / West African intersection. Dahtaw, and its linguistic proximity to the word daughter, connotes female centredness while its spelling expresses a Gullah idiom. We see once again, how the geography of the sea islands becomes a “primary narrative agent,” personifying and preserving the continuity of this matriarchal micro climate (Wardi 45).

Within the day to day functioning of the island, preserving this matriarchal micro climate means protecting African culture and customs and this takes the form of collectivised matrilineal transmission. It is the women who bestow knowledge and history onto society. It is fascinating that this transmission sees no hierarchy between women. Every female character in the film has a distinct voice with an individual knowledge and cultural practice to offer. Women exist in equal proximity to one another. The multiplicity of their identities creates a unified collective front, one where difference is celebrated and role distribution is advocated. We see this through Dash’s establishment of three cultural voices on the island. Grandma, Nana Peazant and Eula.

Grandma takes on the role of educator, passing down African cultural memory to the children of the island. This predominantly manifests via the intersection of language and ritual. An instance of this can be seen when Grandma prepares traditional West African food for the family’s final supper on the island. The children of the island watch in amazement and a lesson takes place. The scene opens with Grandma putting pieces of okra on the children’s head, as they gather round her on the shore line. The dialogue is as follows:

GRANDMA. Oh I love you! Oh! Now this means? [picking up an okra vegetable]

CHILDREN. Gumbo!

GRANDMA. Pot called?

CHILDREN. Sojo!

GRANDMA. Water...Water?

CHILDREN. Deloe!

GRANDMA. Fire?

CHILDREN. Diffy!

GRANDMA. Yeah! Now that's all what Grandma remembers. (*Daughters of the Dust*
00:30:26-00:31:04)

The dialogue here displays the convergence of matriarchal practice and West African custom. As a reminder, matriarchy in the context of the mother centred matrix is a system of “matrilineal or

mother-focussed inheritance” where an “allegiance to the mother” is “required” for “culture” to “remain intact” (Dove 12). We see evidence of this system here. Cultural transmission appears as a matrilineal process with the children instilling their faith and trust in the teachings from their Grandmother. Not only is this displayed in their enthusiastic responses to Grandma’s lesson questions, but a dynamic of respect and attentiveness is presented in the visuals with Grandma and the children huddling together in an intimately shared cultural space. More significantly, the lesson Grandma gives is on African vocabulary, identifying items of African cuisine through a practice of call and response. This is a musical technique which originates in “Sub Saharan Africa” (Fine 90). Matrilineal transmission is saturated in African culture here and we once again see how cultural history and matriarchy intersect. Precolonial memory remains “intact” through this matriarchal practice and thus, the Sea Islands become a site where the mother centred matrix is followed as a social model (Dove 13).

Another example of Dash establishing a mother centred matrix is Nana Peazant’s construction of a memory packet for those who are migrating North. The memory packet consists of locks of her own hair, as well as her mother’s hair. Nana Peazant has many roles as the elder on the island. Her predominant role, however, is to ensure the continuation of African memory, particularly for her family members who are migrating to the mainland. Surrounded by her female descendants on the shoreline, Nana Peazant says:

When I was a child my mother cut this from my hair before she was sold away from me, now I added my own hair. There must be a bond, a connection between those that go north, those that remain. Between us who are here, and those who are across the sea. A connection. We are as two people in one body, the last of the old and the first of the new, we will always live this double life because we are from the sea. We came here in chains and we must survive. There’s saltwater in the blood. (*Daughters of the Dust* 1:28:10-1:29:20)

The hair clippings become a symbol of matrilineal transmission as well as cultural continuity. We see again how culture is construed through the mother, with the preservation of African identity and heritage existing as a process of transferal between women within the family. The symbol of the hair clipping also links the preservation of African culture with the maternal body, which is further connected by Nana Peazant to the sea. Her declaration ‘we are from the sea/ There’s saltwater in our blood,’ is another example of how water becomes maternalised in *Daughters of*

the Dust. The collective maternal bodies of Nana Peazant and her female offspring become synonymous with sea water whereby they converge in a process of remembering African history. This convergence is further highlighted by the diegetic sound of water. In this instance of matrilineal transmission, as well as the scene with Grandma and the children, the sound of waves crashing on the shoreline accompanies these moments of cultural transfer. Sonically, they mimic this pouring of knowledge and culture into the minds and bodies of future generations, and its inherent fluidity functions as a metaphor for such matrilineal transmission. As discussed in chapter one, the surrounding island waters are personified as maternal. The continuous sound of the sea for both the audience and the characters echoes the importance of maternity within Gullah culture and acts as a reminder for cultural transmission to take place via a matriarchal practice, ensuring the continuity and intactness of African culture and history.

This pattern occurs again with Eula's monologue at the end of the film. She too transmits cultural memory to her family. Eula, however, delivers a different historical point of view. As the entirety of the Peazant family congregate on the island's shore line, Eula says:

Do you understand who we are? And what we have become? We're the daughters of those old dusty things Nana carry in her tin can. We carry too many scars from the past. The past own us. We wear our scars like armour for protection. Thick, hard, ugly scars that no one can pass through to ever hurt us again. Let's live our lives without living in the folds of old wounds. (Dash 1:37:43-1:38:43)

Unlike Grandma and Nana Peazant, Eula shares the pain and turmoil that is also present within African memory. As well as *Daughters of the Dust's* exploration of the joy and celebration present within African heritage which is captured through ritual, the film simultaneously neither erases nor denies the generational cultural suffering which persists. Eula's monologue stems from a dialogue regarding the character Yellow Mary and how she has become "ruined" by rape (1:34:59). Many of the women on the island, including Eula are victims of sexual assault by white men, and we see the cultural effects of this ripple through the Peazant family unit. Eula reminds her family and the audience that moving on from the 'scars of the past and the folds of old wounds' requires remembering and confronting the terror they have been through as a community. The opening rhetorical questions require the family to engage in a process of cultural introspection and confrontation. Such historical transmission differs from that of Nana

Peazant and Grandma. While Nana Peazant and Grandma engage in a process of transmitting memory in order to preserve and maintain Sea Island culture and a pre colonial identity, Eula engages with cultural memory in order to move on from the past. Through creating a process of matrilineal transmission which is multi-voiced, Dash captures a complex historical experience which resists monolithic definition. It is the intertwining of pain, suffering, beauty and joy and this matriarchal system allows for such a plurality to be represented. This plurality is evident in the visual montage which follows Eulas monologue. Nana Peazant, Yellow Mary and Eula embrace one another, crying in each other's arms (01:38:57-1:39:22). It is a moment of connection and reconciliation and defines matrilineal transmission as a collective discourse involving multiple female voices which layer multiple experiences of memory. Once again, the crashing of waves on the shore line can be heard throughout Eula's monologue as well as throughout this moment of reconciliation. The sound of the sea provides a backdrop to these different instances of matrilineal transmission, metaphorically protecting and preserving the island's matriarchal climate which the Peazant family have established and inscribed into the geography of the island.

4.2.1. Water, matriarchy and Decolonising the Gaze

In addition to water geographically representing these experiences of matrilineal transmission as well as matriarchal preservation, Dash is highly effective in the way she utilises water's reflective properties in *Daughters of the Dust*. Water saturates the island's terrain and transforms landscapes such as sandy beaches and bayous into mirrors which project reflections of the Peazant women throughout the film. There are many instances where watery reflections provide double images of characters such as Iona, Eula and Yellow Mary. This cinematic technique works to further redefine Dahtaw island as the cultural centre, simultaneously establishing a consciousness which is entirely defined through the matriarchal representation of the island. Critics such as Joel Brouwer have observed the significance of the kaleidoscope in the opening image of the film and how this represents Dash's desire to redefine the gaze set upon Black women. As a woman looks through the kaleidoscope, the audience is presented with what she sees: abstract colours and patterns. Wardi writes: "by twisting the kaleidoscope of what we already know about the African American experience, Dash has created a new way of seeing, and reading, that experience" (5). In other words, a new cultural gaze is metaphorically put forth,

and we see this motif explored further in the refractive nature of the watery island and its connection to the female inhabitants. In order to analyse this, it is essential to understand the gaze of which Black people describe seeing themselves through, and no theorist has documented this better than W.E.B. DuBois and his pioneering of Double Consciousness theory. DuBois describes Double Consciousness as the experience of construing self image through the objectifying gaze of white society. It is an experience of “being an outcast in my own home [...] always looking at one's self through the eyes” of the oppressor (9). This thesis has already addressed Christina Sharpe’s assertion of “Blackness” being seen through the lens of “abjection” and thus, this experience of self image becoming a reflection of white objectification appears as a common cultural experience within the Diasporic community (33).

Dash resists this through her matriarchal construction of Dahtaw island. A Black female community is established as the status quo, thus permitting Black women to define themselves, for themselves. The absence of whiteness throughout the film dismantles a gaze of objectification/abjection and instead allows women on the island to become their own mirrors of representation. Water is used as a symbolic vehicle for this. A moment which captures this is just before Iona sees her family members who have already migrated north, approach the island. Iona runs toward an inland pool which displays crystal clear water. She slowly walks towards it and crouches, admiring her reflection, a watery projection also visible to the audience. She smiles and looks lovingly at herself, as she runs her fingers over her earrings and through her locks (*Daughters of the Dust* 00:29:42-00:30:02). A moment of self love and acceptance is captured here and is inscribed into the island through this reflection. It is clear that Iona sees beauty when she looks at herself in the water, absorbing this self image through a gaze which is free from colonial definition. What is also significant about this cinematic moment is the way in which the reflection produces a double image of Iona. It alludes to this notion of Double Consciousness but immediately undercuts this oppressive experience, as the reflection projects an image which is clearly based in Iona’s sense of belonging and identification. Dahtaw island becomes a space of cultural representation for Black women and this is once again preserved within the island’s waters. This is observed furthermore in the scene in which Eula, Yellow Mary and the character Trula, play in the wet shoreline of Dahtaw island (00:51:06-00:52:51). The women hug, run and play with an umbrella they find buried in the wet sand. These actions are

reflected in the watery glaze of the shore. The mundaneness of these acts is what is radical. They display a sense of “being,” a state Sharpe reminds us is permanently robbed from Diasporic communities (30). She writes that Blackness exists as an experience of “nonbeing” or “being” only “out of place,” a “noncitizen always available to and for death” (86). Here, Dash subverts this and creates a space for Black women to simply *be*. The matriarchal familial structure of Dahtaw island calls for Black women to be seen in relation to each other and through a gaze rooted in Black female led community. The water transforms the shoreline into a mirror and reiterates this gaze, with matriarchal representation becoming imprinted onto the island. Once again, water becomes a maternalised symbolic device, transforming and transmitting an African memory which is defined by and through Black women.

4.3. Breast Milk and Matrilineal Transmission

Unlike *The Deep* and *Daughters of the Dust* where the intersection of water, memory and matriarchal/matrilineal explorations occurs through the symbolic presentation of oceanic sites, in *Beloved*, water takes the form of breast milk. Breast milk is a maternal secretion which is made up of “87%-88% water” (Kim, Yong 301). Because of the high concentration of water in breast milk’s molecular formation, this chapter will define breast milk as a watercourse and once again, we will see how water and maternity become intrinsically linked. In *Beloved*, breast milk becomes the primary agent with which African memory is transmitted and passed onto future generations. It is the substance with which Sethe’s identity as a mother is symbolised, and it exists as a tangible point of connection between herself and her children. Within the context in which the story takes place, the freedom to mother one’s children as a Black woman was destroyed. Children born to slave women were often taken away from their mothers. The mothers themselves were expected, with their milk supply, to “breastfeed their owners’ children” and were even “rented out to breastfeed the offspring of other families” (Roth 805). We see again the power with which *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* colonised Black maternity with breast milk becoming a commodity to be purchased by white society. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison encodes breast milk with decolonial possibility. It becomes the vessel with which Sethe resists slavery and it also functions as a cultural transmitter, one which enables the passing down of Black history and connection to her children. A permeating theme throughout the novel is Sethe’s quest to “get her milk” to her children (Morrison 20). As the novel unfolds, so much of Sethe’s identity

is stripped away. Her memories of receiving multiple modes of violence are revealed to the reader and her ability to maintain a sense of cultural identity becomes progressively more difficult, as does the ability to transmit this heritage onto her children. What, however, remains a constant, is her ability and determination to get her milk to her children. It is a driving narrative agent throughout the novel and becomes the carrier through which Black life and culture must be continued. It is also the substance with which Sethe can maintain her identity as a mother. We see this when Sethe recounts her memory as a fugitive to Paul D:

“I had milk,” she said. “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 Bulgar.” [...] Anyone 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. I told that to the women in the wagon. Told them to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got there in a few days she wouldn’t have forgotten me. The milk would be there and I would be there with it.”(Morrison 20,21)

Images of lactation saturate this passage and inscribe maternity onto Sethe’s body. Milk is described here in abundance. It is depicted through repetition and images of excess, which paradox the ways in which Sethe has been reduced and diminished by slavery practices throughout the novel. The word ‘milk’ is always positioned in relation to the pronoun ‘my/me’ and this is a significant idiomatic choice when it comes to the notion of Sethe’s identity. Sethe’s ability to construct her own sense of self has been repeatedly taken away. Sethe’s production of her own milk, however, resists this. It is reserved for her own children, and becomes a means of establishing her own identity and own sense of agency. It is a substance over which she has possession, and we see this sense of agency manifest further through Morrison’s use of anaphora: ‘Nobody was going to nurse her like me/ Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough/ Nobody knew that she couldn’t pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder.’ The use of anaphora constructs Sethe as affirmative and reinstates autonomy and value to her sense of self, whereby she can reclaim her identity as a mother.

In addition to this, breast milk also functions as a vehicle to connect Sethe to her children. It becomes a tangible bond which works to preserve the Black family unit whilst also performing a process of matrilineal transmission. Sethe's daughter Denver demonstrates this as she also configures her mother's milk as a connective familial substance. She says "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (262). This image put forth by Denver personifies breast milk as a cultural and familial transmitter. It is a maternal vessel which carries the blood of her sister, unifying Sethe, Beloved and Denver as one entity. In this way, the family unit is defined by and stays intact through the mother and thus, a metaphorical depiction of a Mother Centred Matrix can be observed. In *Beloved*, breast milk becomes the sole allegory with which "mother focussed inheritance" takes place (Dove 12). While the horrors of slavery contextualise the novel, Morrison uses this metaphor not only to centralise Black maternity within a history which has attempted its erasure, but also to encode breast milk as a channel for resistance. Breast milk ensures the continuation and preservation of Black life, directly counteracting and opposing the brutality of slavery which sought its eradication. Sethe's determination to get her milk to her children is therefore indicative of a deeper cultural narrative, one which is not only grounded in maintaining a connection to her children, but also one which is rooted in maintaining the existence of an entire community. This determination becomes all the more evident when Sethe's breast milk is commodified by her white slave owners. It is a passage of writing which is brutal in its depiction, yet, we see the ways in which breast milk continues to resist racial violence. Sethe says:

I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. Nobody will ever get my milk no one except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else— and the one time I did, it was took from me— they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby. Nan had to nurse white babies and me too because ma'am was in the rice. The little white babies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; you have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left. I'll tell Beloved about that; she'll understand. She my daughter. The one I managed to have milk for and to get it to her even after they stole it; after they handled me like a cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses. (256,257)

This passage is demonstrative of the violence and dehumanisation Ross details in regard to the treatment of slave women and the robbing of their breast milk. What, however, is significant

about this paragraph is that Sethe's milk supply continues to survive and permeate, even after the slave owner's attempts of its destruction. Sethe manages to 'have milk' for her daughter, 'even after they stole it' and the opening two sentences of this passage continue to construct breast milk as a driving force in assigning maternal agency onto Sethe. The language is emphatic and defines Sethe's status as mother, as one which holds power, duty and authority. We once again see how breast milk is displayed as a vessel for resistance. In the face of such evil and such dehumanisation, it resists demolition and thus constructs Sethe as a resistant body. Sethe's ability to preserve her milk for her children ensures the continuation of Black life and obstructs slavery practices of erasure.

It is of course vital to continue to ensure that this thesis does not dismiss nor devalue the horrors of slavery. In *Beloved*, Sethe experiences here unimaginable forms of violent objectification and these discussions of resistance must not diminish this reality. Referring back to Sharpe, however, is helpful at this moment. Sharpe informs us that wake work is a process of "rupturing" with "our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (18). Morrison executes this process here. The trauma Sethe experiences is 'unimaginable,' but she nevertheless finds ways to 'rupture' the system with breast milk becoming this vessel for resistance. It is an act of "subversion" against the "master class," one which opposes personal and cultural eradication (Fredrickson, Walters 81).

By approaching breast milk as a watercourse, we once again see how water, memory and maternity intersect in a process of redefinition and resistance. Morrison uses breast milk in *Beloved* as a means of maintaining an identity and lineage which constantly risks erasure. It is a fluid which permeates the novel's narrative, metaphorically counteracting and withstanding the cultural violence enacted onto female Black bodies. It functions as a decolonial motif in which a process of *Wake Work* can be observed and a practice of rupturing can take place. While the notion of matriarchy and mother centeredness has been explored more definitively in my other chosen medias, breast milk also functions as a means of matrilineal transmission, thus contributing to a process of "mother-focussed inheritance" (Dove 12).

This chapter has demonstrated the ways in which Solomon, Dash and Morrison have specialised water as mother centred sites. Practices of matriarchy and matrilineal transmission are present in

each of the fictions and function to preserve pre colonial African culture, while also depicting processes of Diasporic maternal resistance. By defining the ocean and the sea islands as matriarchal environments, Solomon and Dash engaged in a process of redefining and reimagining African memory, whereby erased cultural practices predating colonisation are resurrected. Approaching breast milk as a watercourse in *Beloved*, has displayed another aspect of mother centred potential which resists colonial power, protecting and transmitting Black livelihood. Water, memory and maternity once again intersect in a practice of Decoloniality, resisting and reinventing as a means of conserving Diasporic memory and heritage.

5. Chapter Three: Hybridity and the Potential for Radicalism

The final chapter of this thesis will look at the ways in which my chosen writers approach water as a space where maternity and the act of mothering, can be radicalised and transformed. In each of the fictions, maternal identities do not exist as fixed specifications and are instead explored as unanchored roles, which change and mutate, disrupting the rigid binary social constructions that historically and presently continue to underpin mothering. In *The Deep*, *Beloved* and *Daughters of the Dust*, motherhood occupies a hybrid space in which maternal identities resist permanent definition and linear temporalities. Maternity exists outside of categorization whereby mothers across each of the works are not united by their similarity, but by their radical difference and plurality. As outlined in my theoretical chapter, Gloria Anzaldúa is one of the pioneering scholars when it comes to theorising hybridity, and her conception of the *New Mestiza Consciousness* will be consulted in order to analyse presentations of hybridity in my chosen fictions.

5.1. The New Mestiza:

Gloria Anzaldúa describes the New Mestiza as a practice of “inclusivity” (*Borderlands* 99). Her scholarship observes that identity construction usually relies on a process of exclusion, whereby maintaining and preserving identities within society is “contingent” on rejecting those who do not fit the “roles and demands” associated with different social “membership” (Keating 2). In other words, society does not cater for those who straddle the different boundaries of identification or to those who experience the “crossing over” of race, gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity (*Borderlands* Anzaldúa 99). The New Mestiza celebrates “contradictions” and

“ambiguity” (*Borderlands* 101). Anzaldúa elaborates: “The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject- object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through images in her own work how duality is transcended. [...]The answer lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts” (*Borderlands* 102). Healing this ‘split,’ requires embracing this space between the ‘subject/object’ and acknowledging the site where different identity formations intersect. Anzaldúa further explains:

My identity is always in flux; it changes as I step into and cross over many worlds each day—university, home community, job, lesbian, activist, and academic communities. It is not enough for me to say I am a Chicana. It is not enough for me to say I am an intellectual. It is not enough for me to say I am a writer. It is not enough for me to say I am from working-class origins. All of these and none of these are my primary identity. I can’t say, this is the true me, or that is the true me. They are all the true me’s. (*The Gloria Anzaldúa reader* 209, 210)

Anzaldúa’s pluralising of the word ‘me’ here, speaks to the necessity to understand identity as a fluid, hybrid state which opposes construction through binaries. The New Mestiza Consciousness can be understood as a practice of Wake Work. It is a process of “rupturing” the “episteme,” which counteracts the narrow definitions in which identity is socially construed (Sharpe 18). Hybridity, through an Anzaldúan lens, must be interpreted as an act of decolonisation, resisting processes of “othering” and “duality” brought about by colonisation (*The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* 112, 114).

In the context of this thesis, it is also important to comprehend water itself as a hybrid body. Water is, as Anzaldúa states, “always in flux” (*The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* 209). “Water is dynamic, in permanent motion, changing from liquid to solid to vapour” (Wardi 20). Water is “fluid, shifting, and indeterminate (Wardi 3). Water as an element resists tangible definition. It is metamorphic and interconnected, with inland pools feeding streams, streams connecting to rivers, and rivers morphing into the ocean and so on. It occupies the space of the New Mestiza Consciousness transcending permanent and objective classification. For my chosen writers, this offers vast possibilities when redefining and retelling erased histories and identities. For Rivers Solomon, such hybridity has permitted the renegotiation and radicalisation of the role of the mother, usurping its dualistic and binary definitions.

5.2. The Hybrid Maternal Body

The Deep can be understood as a text which conceptualises maternal identities through the perspective of the New Mestiza Consciousness. The Wajinru are not only hybrid in their half human/ half fish ontology, but they are also a species which rejects binary understandings of sex and gender. Throughout the novel, we have seen maternity and mothering take on different formations. Chapter one has focussed on the maternal identities of the pregnant African slave women thrown overboard and their amniotic connection to seawater, and chapter two has explored mothering as a collective system, involving the great sea creatures of the Atlantic Ocean. Already, through these assertions, we see that the role of the mother in Solomon's world of *The Deep* resists monolithic definition. Mothering is too, 'always in flux,' constantly undergoing transformation and redefinition. Solomon continues to expand this space by approaching maternity through a hybrid of Queer Posthumanism, with motherhood becoming detached from the gendered, raced, heterosexual constructs of which the human is understood. In order to carry out this intersectional analysis, it is important to firstly understand the term posthumanism. Though a changing and variable discourse, "In general, it can be diluted to the decentering of the human from the privileged place that classical theology and the long philosophical history handed down from Plato has traditionally positioned it" (Umbrello 28). The result of this, therefore, is a process of "ecological thinking," in which "Nonhuman animals and other forms of life come into the fold on an equal ontological basis as a consequence of the removal of the human ontological pedestal" (Umbrello 29). While this is true in the aquatic world of *The Deep*, scholars such as Jalondra Davis have noted that posthumanism often fails to interrogate the social constructions in which the human is ontologically defined. She notes that "the human itself [is] a raced, gendered, and classed construct produced through conquest and racial chattel slavery" (350). Within Social imagination, the human is thus overly represented as a "white, straight, male, able-bodied, propertied, rational individual" (Davis 350). Inevitably, those who do not fit this representation become functional in centralising and maintaining the human as the white straight male, and no identity has historically been relied on more, than that of the mother. For Queer theorists such as Shelley Park, motherhood is bound to notions of "heteronormativity," femininity and passivity, which she acknowledges is because of the social expectation for mothers to be the "breeders" and bearers of future humans (1). Park recognises

that the maternal expectation of procreation “renders” queerness and mothering as “oxymoron[s]” (1). To mother, is “to leave her queerness behind,” with queerness disrupting societal claims about who “real” mothers are (1). Park writes that society deems “real” and “good” mothers those who obtain “white privilege and class Privilege as these intersect with norms of femininity” (4). A “real mother” must also be the “biological mother” and thus, motherhood is revoked from multiple identities, pronouncing those which do not fit this narrow definition, maternally “invisible” (6,7).

Through constructing and imagining the Wajinru community, Solomon resists this. The half fish/half human hybrid who possesses both reproductive organs, mating and rearing children through systems of polygamy, redefine both the mother and the human. The human is deposed in the world of *The Deep*, and the Queer *mer* mother is placed on top of the “ontological pedestal,” renegotiating definitions of both maternity and humanism (Umbrello 29). In addition to this, the Wajinru’s African heritage also “disrupts Western humanism,” further removing the white male from the universal centre (Davis 350). A passage which demonstrates this is when Yetu and Ori, the human Yetu befriends while stranded in the inland waters of an island, have a conversation about the sexual difference between humans and the Wajinru. Yetu observes the two different types of genitalia the “two- legs” (humans) have and inquires: “Is it a choice?” Yetu pressed. Wajinru bodies didn’t tend to have differences along those lines, but like two-legs, there were men, women, both, and neither. Such things were self determined, and Yetu wondered if two-legs had body self determination too” (Solomon 116). Ori replies:

“It’s not a choice really. People have different bodies. Different...configurations. There is nothing tucked up inside of me. Just a vulva, which is, hmm, passage that connects—”

“I know what it is,” said Yetu. “Does sperm come out if it then?”

“No” said Ori. [...] Wajinru discusses bodies openly. They were largely if not always naked in front of one another. Through the water, they could feel and hear private things that happened miles away. [...]

“Does sperm come out of yours?” asked Ori.

Yetu shook her head.

“Wajinru have a place to envelope, and then there’s something else, and that is what gives sperm. Yet it is always tucked away until the time of mating.”

“You have both?” asked Ori.

“Of course.” (117)

Here, the Wajinru anatomy is presented as a body which transcends definition. Not only do the Wajinru biologically resist binary categorization, but we learn that identification is always a practice of choice. It is a praxis of the New Mestiza, where identity is constructed through enactments of “inclusivity” (Anzaldúa 99). Such inclusivity is further represented in the language which accompanies the description of the Wajinru body. It is void of shame and discomfort and this contrasts to the idiom Oori uses when describing her own body. Yetu uses emphatic phrases such as ‘of course’ when discussing her intersex anatomy. She also makes clear that for the Wajinru, bodies are a point of connection and freedom, with words such as ‘openly’ being used to describe anatomical discourse, determining nakedness as a state which spiritually and consciously bonds the Wajinru together ‘through the water.’ In comparison, Oori’s use of syntax in describing her human body is fragmented and disjointed. The opening of her reply ‘People have different bodies. Different... configurations. There is nothing tucked up inside of me. Just a vulva, which is, hmm, a passage that connects—’ is assembled through erratic punctuation such as ellipses and hyphens as well as exclamations of uncertainty such as ‘hmm.’ Such irregular syntax conveys a tone of anxiety and illustrates the confusion which comes with defining the self through socially prescribed binaries. Sylvia Wynter has noted that this is inevitable when the white male becomes the “over representation” of the human (260). Those who do not resemble this “validated and entitled” representation will be left with an ingrained sense of inadequacy (Davis 351). Through this linguistic comparison, the human is usurped. The human is presented as an unattainable identity and the self determining Wajinru are recentered as the ontological standard. As the beginning of this chapter has demonstrated, sexual and gender identities massively inform the ways in which mothering is socially defined, with maternity being understood through the same exclusionary practices. In *The Deep*, this is also resisted with the fluidity of sex and gender leading to a total reimagining of what maternity and parentage look like. Yetu indicates this through recounting the act of reproduction. She says:

Our bodies move in the water in an awkward rhythm until passion takes hold and we are in ecstasy. After finishing, we swim back to the pod. There is possibility here, for more, to make more. There could be zoti aleyu who know who their parents are, whose past is not a question mark. So we make more and more. We find more. We build. The Deep is our home and we are filling it. This cold place will become our shelter for any stranded, abandoned thing. In this big wide sea, we are far from the only strange fish. (54)

There is a direct link here between the fluidity of the Wajinru's sexuality and gender, and the ever evolving possibilities of motherhood. It is important to acknowledge the pronouns Yetu utilises here to describe rearing and procreation. She uses the plural personal. 'We' and 'our' become the exclusive pronouns to describe parenting. Not only are they genderless, but they also point to the act of mothering being unsubscribed to a particular gendered role. Later on in the novel, Yetu informs us that procreation can "involve any number of Wajinru, frequently up to five" with no prescription as to how genitals are manoeuvred with "everything to be engaged at once" (Solomon 119). This directly dismantles mothering as a gendered role, with constructs such as heteronormativity and femininity, bearing no relevance or social power within the world of *The Deep*. This passage also indicates that mothering is not bound to the biological production of children with Yetu exclaiming that the Wajinru can be "parents" to "any abandoned, stranded thing." This further expands the definition of mothering, detaching it from exclusive practices of childbearing. Through the hybrid bodies of the Wajinru, Solomon is able to radicalise both the human and the mother at their intersection. Davis' "overrepresented" observation of the human is pushed to the margins and instead, bodies and identities which defy objective definition are repositioned at the centre.

Not only is this centre renegotiated through the celebration of the Wajinru form, but the human itself is also put forth by Solomon as an unstable, fragile identity, and is once more removed from the "ontological pedestal" (Umbrello 29). While this chapter has thus far explored the ways in which Solomon criticises the rigid definitions in which the human is pedestalled, Solomon goes one step further, satirising "Western humanism" which elevates the human as well as, "rationalism and empirical science above other ways of knowing" (Davies 352). Davies argues that "the human itself is not a static being" and we see this in the final passage of the novel, when Oori undergoes a transformation (351).

They held each other close until Yetu was able to transfer to Oori the remembering of the womb. Lost in it, Oori stopped treading, and she sank a little. Yetu let her sink, holding her tightly so she could quickly return to the surface if need be. But when Oori jolted from the remembering, she was breathing underwater, just as she'd breathed in the womb. She did not transform in the way wajinru pups transformed in the two-legs bellies. She didn't grow gills or fins, but like Yetu, she could breathe both on land and in the sea. She was a completely new thing. Yetu beckoned her downward into the dark, into this

world of beauty. For most of her life, Yetu had to shut it out, split between the past and the present, her mind unable to manage even the dulllest input, But the world was infinite and magnificent, and she has finally found her place in it. “Come” said Yetu , Oori followed. This time the two legs venturing into the depths had not been abandoned to the sea. But invited into it. (Solomon 155)

This final passage of the novel not only displays the intersection of maternity and posthumanism but also consolidates the complex explorations of water, memory and maternity which this thesis has set out to investigate. Maternal powers are once again handed over to the ocean which becomes personified as the creator and progenitor of new life forms. The ocean sits as a metaphoric mother, caring for and growing life, construed again through assertions of the womb. The boundaries of maternity are thus stretched even further and are not only detached from the human, but from anatomical bodies altogether. Simultaneously, this passage illustrates the infinite possibilities of posthuman hybrid forms. Solomon is clear that Oori does not transform into a Wajnrü being, but into ‘a completely new thing.’ The ocean, the mother and the human intersect here and appear to be ‘always in flux,’ undergoing continuous processes of redefinition. Western humanism as a praxis is dismantled and as a result, so are “colonial hierarchies” which perpetuate a racialised human-animal divide” (Davis 342). The hybrid is embraced and thus *The Deep* can be understood as a decolonial text which reimagines both the history and future of African Diasporic beings. Their existence is not defined through exclusionary definitions of identity but through metaphors of transcendence and possibility.

5.3. Radical Motherhood, Radical Decolonisation: escaping colonial temporalities

In *Daughters of The Dust*, hybridity also sits as a technique for maternal radicalisation. Unlike *The Deep*, however, where maternal bodies themselves become hybrid figures of the New Mestiza, mothering is displayed as a transcendental process of transmission between both the living, as well as ancestral spirits of the dead. It exists in a state of hybridity whereby mothering is no longer attached to a singular person or role, but is instead a practice ‘in flux’ which involves the communal effort of those alive on the island, as well as the ancestors who came before. Parks’ observation that society renders ‘real mother[s]’ those who equate to the singular identity of the ‘biological mother,’ is dismantled on multiple levels throughout *Daughters of The Dust*. We have already seen how the matriarchal infrastructure of the island has defined maternal rearing as a shared duty which resists nuclear familial configuration, but furthermore, the

otherworldly maternal influence of the ancestors, places mothering in an in-between space which exists outside of linear history and time. As discussed in my theoretical chapter, “unilinear time” is something which is rooted in “imperialism” and thus, that which “assumes many temporalities” and embraces “a pluriversality of local time” can be observed as a decolonial practice (Mignolo 21). Dash, determining maternity as something which exists outside of linear time, deems mothering an act of decolonisation. Not only does this radicalise maternal identities, detaching them from linear historical tropes of heterosexuality, femininity and whiteness, but simultaneously, mothering becomes a counter narrative to linear discourse, in which erased histories can be remembered through “maternal circuits of memory” (Hochberg 3). According to Hochberg, memory will always sit as an “alternative to history” as it is an “unmediated” channel for approaching the past (1). She elaborates that within the Diasporic literary tradition, the ‘mother’ as an identity “thematically” represents an “alternative” female voice and thus, we see how memory and maternity share similar counter narratorial functions (2). Their intertwining, thus, offers a new discourse where history as a linear patriarchal praxis can be renegotiated and retold through these maternal assertions of memory. In addition to this, Sharpe shares similar temporal ideas about “Blackness” stating that it is an “anagrammatical” experience. She continues “Ana-, as a prefix, means ‘up, in place or time, back, again, anew.’ So, blackness anew, blackness as a/temporal, in and out of place and time putting pressure on meaning and that against which meaning is made” (Sharpe 76). In *Daughters of the Dust*, ‘anagrammatical Blackness,’ maternity and memory intersect, creating a third space- the space of the New Mestiza, where linear history and its accompanying colonial, patriarchal tropes undergo a “physical collapse” (Wardi 50). Such collapse creates a space for redefinition and radicalisation whereby maternity, race and history can be reimagined and retold outside imperial, “unilinear” temporalities (Mignolo 21).

5.3.1 Maternal Circuits of Memory

The notion of “maternal circuits of memory” put forth by Hochberg can most overtly be identified in *Daughters of the Dust*, through the relationship between Nana Peasant and the Unborn Child of Eula and Eli who narrates the film. Nana, the Elder of the island and the Unborn Child mediate the hybrid, transcendental space of which maternity occupies. Maternity is understood as a cyclical process determined by the “old souls”- the ancestors, to whom only

Nana Peazant and the Unborn Child have direct access (*Daughters of the Dust* 00:08:10). Those who have passed on are the bearers of those to come, and thus life and death become detached from unilinear time, and instead these ‘maternal circuits of memory’ become the dominant mode of constructing the history as well as the future of Dahtaw Island. The Unborn narrator is, for everyone but Nana, a non-diegetic presence. She is neither seen nor heard by any of the other characters, including her mother and father. Nana, however, can see, hear and feel her presence and this connection is made clear through the musical score of the film. The connection between Nana Peazant and the Unborn Child is represented through a musical theme consisting of flutes, wind chimes and the harp, which metaphorically represents their metaphysical relationship. Everytime the Unborn Child is present on screen, this theme is heard. Machiolartti writes “it is in the key of B, the key of Libra, representing balance and justice. This character was coming into the world, to impart justice” (111). Initially, it appears to be an extradiegetic theme, reserved for the ears of the audience. It becomes rapidly clear, however, that Nana Peazant too, can hear this music and also aligns it with the spiritual presence of the Unborn Child. Music here transcends “spatial and temporal dimensions” just like Nana and the Unborn Child (Machiolartti 106). It defines maternity and the continuation of the Peazant family as a circular phenomenon “shatter[ing] the temporal restrictions” of linear time and history (Dash qtd Machiolartti 107).

This becomes all the more evident through the rhetoric used by Nana Peazant and the Unborn narrator. The Unborn narrator’s opening monologue reads:

My story begins on the eve of my family’s migration north. My story begins before I was born. My great, great grandmother Nana Peazant saw her family coming apart, her flowers to bloom in a distant frontier. And then, there was my Ma and Daddy’s problem. Nana prayed and the old souls guided me into the new world. I came in time for the big celebration. To be among my cousins, my aunties and uncles. I can still see their faces, smell the oil in the wicker lamps. I can hear the voice of aunty Haeger, calling out for her daughters Iona and Myown and teasing the newlyweds. (00:07:10-00:08:40)

The unborn child’s statement immediately disintegrates linear time as well as renegotiates maternity as a process existing between three ontological states. Much of her language is constructed through paradox and contradiction. The second sentence is a clear example of this. Her utterance ‘my story begins before I was born’ cannot be understood through linear projections of time and meaning. The verb ‘begins,’ directly next to the adverb ‘before,’ paired

with her present tense narratorial voice, explodes linear temporalities and in turn, chronological history. Unmediated memory as a circular discourse becomes the replacement model for understanding her statement, which is itself construed through alternative modes of maternity. This is presented through the sentence ‘Nana prayed and the old souls guided me into the world.’ Maternity is not only constructed through a spiritual collective effort here, distributed between Nana and the ancestors, but the word ‘guided’ also entrusts the ancestors with midwifery/ Doula duties. Maternity thus is defined through a connection between the dead, the living and the future, and becomes a process of transcendence involving multiple temporal spaces and beings. In this way, maternity and history become simultaneously radicalised. Time as a linear phenomenon is subverted through these maternal circuits of memory, which themselves resist the singular reductive definitions of maternity which this thesis has previously explored. Space and time break apart and a spiritual hybrid space is embraced. A phrase which comes up multiple times throughout the film is: “what's past is prologue” and it is maternity which illustrates this space of temporal circularity (*Daughters of the Dust* 00:06:12).

The notion of history as an objective study of the past is usurped in *Daughters of the Dust* and it is primarily Nana Peazant who displays this. As this thesis has already demonstrated, looking to collective and personal memory is the replacement method for consulting the past and we see this through the memorialisation of language. “I recollect ,I remember, I recall” are phrases which those on the island use to discuss that which has come before, and near the end of the film, Nana illustrates how these maternal circuits of memory became a method of resistance against slavery and colonial history (*Daughters of the Dust* 1:09:15). Nana says:

I recollect how we live in the time before freedom come, In the old days. They didn't keep good record of our births, our deaths or the sellin of slaves back then. A male child may get took from their mother and sold at birth. The year later, the same person may have to mate with his own mother or sister if they was brought back together again, so it was important for the slave theyselves, to keep the family ties, just like the African Griot, who would hold these records in they head. The old souls in each family could recollect all the births, death, marriage and sale. Those 18th Century Africans, the watchers, the keepers, the ancestors. (*Daughters of the Dust* 1:12:20-1:13:27)

Nana Peazant's ‘recollection’ of the time ‘before freedom’ is representative of Partus Sequitur Ventrem. Maternity metaphorically exists in “the belly of the ship” and is a product of a linear

colonial history (Sharpe 74). Not only does the refusal to record births result in mass erasure, but Nana also informs us that it resulted in forced incest between family members, situating maternity within a space of abjection. It is only through deconstructing practices of linear history that this space can be reconstructed. This is achieved through the ‘old souls’ becoming agents of maternity and historical memory. They become authoritative figures which exist outside of linearity, counteracting colonial methods of erasure and degradation. By recollecting ‘all the births,’ memory becomes a counter discourse to linear history and maternity becomes detached from colonial temporalities, transcending the boundaries of *partus sequitur ventrem*. Practices of recollection and remembering maintain a Black history which has otherwise been erased. Similarly, Blackness appears “anagrammatical” (Sharpe 76). The deceased ancestors- ‘those 18th century Africans,’ becoming the ‘watchers’ and ‘keepers’ of those family members still alive, places Blackness “in and out of time” (Sharpe 76). Maternity and memory intersect in a practice of resistance against colonial history, disrupting and disputing linear temporalities.

As this thesis is investigating the intersection of water, memory and maternity, it is of course necessary to bring the watery geography of the sea islands into this conversation surrounding temporalities. I would speculate that Dash’s ability to put forth temporalities which defy linear history would not be possible on the mainland. Dahtaw island’s removal from the mainland allows the continuation and celebration of African culture as well as the radicalisation and experimentation of maternal identities and memory. This chapter has already argued that maternity occupies a hybrid space, a space in which linear time collapses and maternity is renegotiated as a process involving generations of the past, the present and the future. Throughout the film, Dahtaw island as a geography, enables and mirrors such transcendence. The Island’s shoreline is primarily where the film’s action takes place. It is not only a physical borderland between land and the ocean but it also simultaneously “acts as a conduit to the otherworldly,” defying spiritual and temporal boundaries (Wardi 35). Wardi has thoroughly documented how wetlands and bayous are hybrid sites where distinction breaks down and the possibilities for redefinition and radicalisation become infinite. Although we are dealing with a different terrain here, I believe her analysis of bayous can be applied to the shoreline of Dahtaw island and its physical properties. Wardi writes: “That the two elements—land and water—coexist, layer, and overlap to the point of being indistinguishable from one another

engenders a theory of reading geographies, bodies, and texts as resisting hegemonic labelling and classification. As a geographic borderland that morphs from one state to another, wetlands are a space of ambiguity, where there is constant and languid saturation” (85). This is true for the shoreline of Dahtaw island which, depending on the tides, is both land and water, and sometimes a hybrid of both, with the ocean changing the texture of the sandy terrain throughout different points of the day. The sea islands thus become geographical “in-between spaces” (Wardi 45). It is no surprise, therefore, that it is on this malleable terrain where Nana Peasant and the Unborn Child connect. The disintegration of permanent definition warrants the possibility for metaphysical abstraction and the shoreline acts as a portal between the spiritual and tangible realms of the island. There is a clear moment where this collapse of spatial and spiritual boundaries occurs:

The Unborn Child can be seen running toward Nana Peasant in the break of the waves- the very point where land and sea meet. The Unborn Child’s running is accompanied by the musical theme discussed earlier as well as the sound of the wind and the waves breaking on the shore. As the Unborn Child runs, she says “Nana prayed for help. I got there just in time.” Nana then says “Come child! Come!” Nana then inhales deeply, as if breathing in the Unborn Child’s spiritual presence (Dash 00:25:53-00:26:17).

A full circuit of maternal transmission seems to take place in this montage. The visuals echo the Unborn narrator’s previous description of the old souls guiding her into the world via her Nana’s prayers. Maternal circuits of memory are established and they are geographically specialised onto the shore. The hybridity of the shoreline mirrors the temporal collapse of which memory and maternity are construed. Just as the sand and ocean converge, so do Nana and the Unborn Child and thus, the terrain of the Sea Islands become a temporal extension of these maternal circuits of memory.

It is also important to interrogate the ocean as a temporal body itself. Scholars who engage with the ocean via a decolonial approach are consistent in pointing out that the ocean resists linearity. Wardi has noted that “the sea itself is an ecotonal space that provides an interface not only of creatures and habitats, but of time itself. It contains the past, present, and future; indeed, in the

cycle of things, the distinctions between these humanly defined temporal categories become blurred. Time does not seem linear—if anything it is cyclical, experiential, linked with the processes of living, dying, and decomposing of various life forms” (20). Wardi’s description of the ocean here is strikingly similar to the ways in which Dash constructs maternal circuits of memory throughout *Daughters of the Dust*. Vocabulary such as ‘interface, cyclical, experiential’ are words which could also be used to express the temporal circularity of maternity throughout the film, particularly pertaining to the intermedial relationship between Nana Peazant and the Unborn Child. Applying this temporal definition of the ocean onto the montage of the Unborn Child running along the shore illustrates the impactful role the coastal geography of the sea island plays in radicalising notions of history, memory and maternity. The cyclical waters of the ocean, washing the shoreline of Dahtaw island as the Unborn Child runs through the surf, is itself a moment of layered ‘interface’. Temporal Linearity undergoes total collapse and Dahtaw island as a geographical site transcends categorical definition. In turn, so do notions of maternity and constructions of memory. The watery terrain of the island and its temporal defying properties enables new methods for understanding African history which is retold through these assertions of maternal memory circuits. Not only does this disintegrate colonial discourse but it simultaneously radicalises maternity, detaching it from singular gendered identities and linear assertions.

5.4. The Loving Mother

A similar eco/ temporal relationship can be observed in *Beloved*. Like *Daughters of the Dust*, maternal connections are situated outside of linear time. Maternity is mediated through the watery metaphysical where water is specialised as a site of reunification between Sethe and the spirit of her deceased daughter Beloved. Similarly to how the hybrid shoreline of Dahtaw Island mirrors the extraterrestrial relationship between Nana Peazant and the Unborn child, in *Beloved*, water symbolically bridges Beloved and Sethe back together. Mothering occupies a temporal “in-between” space once more, functioning “outside the linear time of history” (Wardi 45, Wyatt 480). Wardi notes that ghosts and spirits of the dead are identities frequently found within the African American expressive tradition. She writes that “ghosts are agents of cultural memory that aid in the ongoing negotiation of African Diasporic identity” (50). We have seen through analysing temporalities in *Daughters of the Dust* how maternity and Diasporic identity have

become radicalised through their metaphysical depiction. In *Beloved*, however, such maternal radicalisation becomes abject, as we find out that it was Sethe herself who murdered her daughter with a “handsaw,” in an attempt to protect her from a life as a captured slave (Morrison 211). It is indisputably an image of horror. Morrison, however, has been clear on defining such an act as one of radical maternal love. She has said: “For me, it was the ultimate gesture of the loving mother. It was also the outrageous claim of a slave. The last thing a slave woman owns is her children” (qtd in Frederickson 105). In this way, Sethe’s murder of Beloved becomes an act of resistance against the slave owning class. Fredrickson and Walters and their research on gendered resistance during slavery have demonstrated that infanticide was not an uncommon practice carried out by enslaved women. They write: “Black women used abortion and infanticide to sabotage the perpetuation of slavery through economic and sexual exploitation of their female reproductive potential, depriving future generations of an enslaved workforce composed of their children” (Fredrickson,Walters 53). Sethe’s story is based on the real life of Margaret Garner, a slave woman “who slit the throat of her two-year-old daughter to save her from being returned to slavery” (Fredrickson, Walters xi). The knowledge that Sethe’s story is based on a factual historical account “forces its readers to consider this question deeply: What does it mean for a mother to kill her child out of love? [...] Morrison—via Sethe and, by extension, Margaret Garner—insists that her readers take this question seriously. As rendered by Morrison, the enslaved woman’s choice of infanticide is powerful and redemptive, even while troubling and tough; it is a loving murder” (Fredrickson and Walters 105). This notion of ‘a loving murder’ is legitimised by Morrison through her symbolic presentation of water and its function to reunite Sethe and Beloved. The fact that an embodied Beloved returns to Sethe aligns the act of murder with one of deliverance and rescue, simultaneously renegotiating temporal boundaries. Death no longer exists as a permanent state of decay, but more so, a departure from linear time and the accompanying atrocities of slavery. Blackness and maternity therefore intersect via an “anagrammatical” practice. They exist “up, in place or time, back, again, anew [...] putting pressure on meaning and that against which meaning is made” (Sharpe 76). The ‘loving murder’ carried out by the mother sits as a radical act of resistance. Not only does it radicalise the boundaries and practices of motherhood, but maternity itself also becomes a radical process of usurping and decentralising linearity, placing Blackness “in and out of place and time”

(Sharpe 76). In this way, methods of erasure become obstructed with Blackness and maternity transcending the temporalities of colonial control.

5.4.1. Saturated Water Bodies

Wyatt has noted that “when the maternal body becomes the locus of discourse, the metaphorical becomes the actual” (478). This is evident through the ways in which water is metaphorically used by Morrison to realise the resurrection of Beloved, returning her to Sethe and thus restoring maternal connection. My previous chapter on *Beloved* explored the significance of breast milk—specifically, its excess presentation and its function to maintain Black life and matrilineal connection with her living children. “Beloved, comes back in the body of a nineteen-year-old” and thus breast milk as a medium for connection is not viable (Wyatt 474). Instead, Morrison spacialises both Sethe and Beloved as saturated bodies of water, symbolically seeping and gushing into one another. The language Morrison uses is not dissimilar to that of her depiction of breast milk. It is excessive, and thus the watery transmission between Sethe and Beloved upon her return becomes maternalised and functions as a semiotic transmission of milk. This is clear upon Beloved’s embodied return. Morrison writes:

A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree. All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to crack the brim in her straw hat. Everything hurt, but her lungs most of all. Sopping wet and breathing shallow she spent those hours trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids. The day’s breeze blew her dress dry, the night wind wrinkled it (65).

Beloved’s realisation occurs when she walks out of a stream. It is the first time in the novel where Beloved exists as an embodied human. It is a moment of resurrection, a moment of rebirth. Water sits as a site of temporal hybridity here. Prior to this moment, Beloved has been referenced as a ghost, a spirit who is physically confined to the realm of those who have passed on. It is only via emerging through water that Beloved is actualised and thus, water functions as a temporal bridge, linking the present world with those of the past. Linearity shatters at this moment. In addition, Morrison’s description of Beloved deems her as anagrammatical. She remains ‘sopping wet,’ permanently saturated by the waters of the stream, an embodiment of the hybrid temporal watersite. Such imagery places her in and out of time and this further functions

to legitimise Sethe's murder of Beloved as an act of resistance. Sethe's actions have not led to Beloved's destruction, as Blackness is not confined to linear temporal spaces. Morrison explodes linear time and thus confronts the notion of death existing as a permanent state. Like *Daughters of the Dust*, circuits of memory appear to replace linearity. Beloved's rebirth from the water demonstrates this and it is further emphasised by Sethe's response to seeing Beloved. Morrison writes:

And, for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity. She said, "Oh excuse me," and ran around to the back of 124. Not since she was a baby girl, being cared for by the eight year old girl who pointed out her mother to her, had she had an emergency that unimaginable. She never made the outhouse. Right in front of its door, she had to lift up her skirts, and the water she voided was endless. Like a horse, she thought, but as it went on and on she thought, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born. So much water Amy said "Hold on, Lu. You going to sink us you keep that up" But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now. [...] She tidied herself up and ran around to the porch. No one was there. All three were inside—Paul D and Denver standing before the stranger, watching her drink cup after cup of water. (66,67)

Sethe undergoes a phantom birth upon seeing Beloved. The depiction of Sethe's uncontrollable urination mimics the breaking of amniotic fluid. At the same moment Beloved emerges 'sopping wet' from the stream, Sethe is overcome by excessive and unstoppable amounts of water which appear to overwhelm her body. Although Sethe herself links the 'endless' flow of urine to her memory of birthing Denver, Morrison's tandem display of Beloved's river emergence, followed by Sethe's urination, is indicative to the reader of a direct symbolic relation between the two events. Beloved's arrival from the river becomes synonymous with Sethe's phantom labour. It is a moment of rebirth, not only for Beloved, but also for Sethe as a mother. Similarly to Morrison's execution of breast milk, these images of interlinking watery excess, reinstate a tangible mother daughter connection. Not only does water become maternalised here, but it is also simultaneously used as a vehicle to establish maternal temporal circuits. Linear understandings of life and death are obscured by water's semiosis, and a cyclical temporal relationship is brought forth. In this way, the temporalities Morrison establishes do not link death with indefinite destruction. Water bridges the gap between life and death and allows Sethe to reimagine mothering through a process of metaphorical rebirth. Maternity is once more

radicalised, transcending linear time, as well as becoming aligned with practices of colonial protest.

As the novel progresses, the relationship between Sethe and Beloved continues to be negotiated through water. After Beloved exits the stream, she is taken to 124, where she indicates an insatiable thirst for water. Morrison writes: “ ‘She said she was thirsty,’ said Paul D. He took off his cap. ‘Mighty thirsty looks like.’ The woman gulped water from a speckled tin cup and held it out for more. Four times Denver filled it, and four times the woman drank as though she had crossed a desert. When she was finished a little water was on her chin, but she did not wipe it away” (67). In addition to water bridging the temporal gap between life and death, it also metaphorically returns Beloved to Sethe’s womb. Throughout the novel, Sethe’s maternal status has been specialised through water. We have seen this through the Ohio river, as well as through the transmission of breast milk. Water signifies her maternity and thus Beloved’s unquenchable thirst for water can be analysed as the desire to be returned to Sethe and the safety of her womb. This is further indicated by the imagery of water clinging to Beloved’s chin which ‘she did not wipe away.’ Not only does this image infantilize Beloved, as the water mimics that of dribble, but also Beloved’s decision to keep it on her face, further indicates Beloved’s desire to metaphorically return to water, and therefore Sethe. Water reunites mother and daughter once more and this is emphasised moreover when Morrison writes “rainwater held onto pine needles for dear life and Beloved could not take her eyes off Sethe” (74). At first glance, there is a tone of irrelevance between these two statements as they appear to be completely unrelated. Approaching water as a vessel for maternal connection, however, transforms the rainwater and pines into a metaphor for the relationship between Sethe and Beloved. It is a similar image to the one of water on Beloved’s chin. It mimics their reunification. Wyatt has pointed out that “Morrison gives a voice to the preverbal infant” who is “able to articulate infantile feelings that ordinarily remain unspoken” (474). “Her desire to regain the maternal closeness of a nursing baby” is personified through water (474). It is a vehicle for maternal connection, and Sethe herself acknowledges this at the end of the novel:

I would have known at once when my water broke. The minute I saw you sitting on the stump, it broke. And when I did see your face it had more than a hint of what you would like after all these years. I would have known who you were right away because the cup

after cup of water you drank proved and connected to the fact that you dribbled clear spit on my face the day I got to 124. (259)

Wyatt's assertion that "the metaphorical becomes the actual" when "the maternal body becomes the locus of discourse" is profoundly resonant in this quotation (478). Up until this moment, the semiotic function of water has appeared to be only accessible to the reader. Here, however, Sethe reveals awareness that she is connected to Beloved through water. The symbolic becomes tangible and it is also indicative that Sethe rejects the notion of linear time. Linearity fragments in this passage and time becomes disjointed. The memory of Beloved as a baby 'dribbling spit' becomes synonymous with her embodied return from the river and her unquenchable thirst for water. Maternal circuits of memory again usurp linearity and water enables anagrammatical matrilineal connection. Blackness, memory and maternity intersect via a practice of radicalisation in which they transcend colonially controlled time frames.

This chapter has examined the ways in which depictions of hybridity function to radicalise maternity as well as history in my chosen fictions. Each work situates maternity within a space of 'flux' where acts of mothering can be reimagined and renegotiated. In *The Deep*, Solomon achieves this by deconstructing the binary assertions of gender which underpin motherhood, creating an entirely new maternal identity. Both the colonial assertion of the human as well as the mother are usurped with the Wajinru's hybrid ontology decentering such constructions from cultural discourse. Maternity in *Daughters of the Dust* and *Beloved*, occupies a hybrid in between temporal space where linear time and history break down. Not only has this chapter explored how this radicalises maternity, detaching it from the colonial constraints of linear history, but such temporal hybridity also calls for an alternative historical mode to be put forth. Both works offer maternal circuits of memory for understanding the past, counteracting a history of erasure and eradication.

6. Conclusion: Returning to the Wake

At the end of chapter two of *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe asks her readers: “In the afterlives of *partus sequitur ventrem* what does, what can, mothering mean for Black women, for Black people?” (78). Sharpe herself ponders this question and lands on an answer which is devoid of hope. She writes: “What kind of mother/ing is it if one must always be prepared with knowledge of the possibility of the violent and quotidian death of one’s child? Is it mothering if one knows that one’s child might be killed at any time in the hold, in the wake by the state no matter who wields the gun?” (78). Sharpe returns here to the symbolic markers such as the Ship’s hold and determines that these signifiers persist in underpinning Black life as an experience of “ongoing and irresolvable abjection” (Sharpe 14). Although her conception of wake work functions to “imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property,” the semiotic construction of the womb as the slave ship’s hold seems finite here, with Black maternity remaining “disfigured” (Sharpe 18,74). For Sharpe, the colonisation of the womb permeates, and the womb itself continues to function as “a factory producing blackness as abjection” (74). Through analysing the work of Rivers Solomon, Toni Morrison and Julie Dash, I believe that this question: “what can, mothering mean for Black women, for Black people?” in the afterlife of “*Partus Sequitur Ventrem*,” is one which can in fact be answered with hope for the future (Sharpe 78). While wake work, for Sharpe, is a process of “tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially,” her work is clear in demonstrating that “resolution” of the symbolic persistence of the ship/ hold is not possible. It is at this point where Dash, Solomon and Morrison’s engagement in wake work departs. Each of their fictions expand the procedure of wake work into something which directly challenges, redefines and reimagines these symbolic markers, and we have seen this via their semiotic return to water. By defining water as inherently maternal, Solomon, Dash and Morrison have been able to renegotiate and conceptualise its synonymy with the memory of the ship- the “Middle Passage” (Sharpe 46). Such redefinition of water has not only detached Black history from exclusive images of colonial horror, but it has also enabled the renegotiation of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* whereby the womb is released from the constraints of the Ship’s hold, and is redefined as a site of unlimited rebirth and transcendence. The mother identity is simultaneously freed from “their non/status, their

non/being-ness” with water in each three fictions creating opportunity for maternity itself to be radicalised (Sharpe 74).

If I return to my thesis statement, it is these three points which I have investigated in this dissertation. Chapter one has explored the ways in which Dash, Morrison and Solomon renegotiate the statute of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* via their depictions of water terrains. I argued that the ocean in *The Deep* is reimagined by Solomon through maternal symbolism in which it becomes an extension of the womb, which is thus recentred as a source of life. I investigated how “That which is brought forth follows the womb” is redefined as an expression of possibility, where new life forms such as the Wajinru depict a reconfiguration of Diasporic memory, resisting the destruction brought about by the Middle Passage. An exploration of the Ohio River in *Beloved* also illustrated a reconceptualisation of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*. By analysing Sethe’s birth of Denver into the Ohio River, I demonstrated the ways in which its emancipatory waters freed Black maternity from colonial control, while also observing the ways in which the river itself sat as a maternal site of literal and symbolic birth. An interrogation of the Sea Islands followed where I argued that Dash transformed Dahtaw island into a maternal body, preserving and transmitting African lineage and heritage. I defined the island as a symbolic womb which conserved the memory of African ancestors. My analysis centred around Nana Peasant’s assertion that “the ancestors and the womb are one and the same,” which I argued was mapped onto the terrain of the Sea Islands. *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* underwent a process of redefinition once more, in which the womb was re-centred as sacred terrain within African Diasporic imagination, disconnecting the birth canal from colonial control.

In chapter two, I continued to investigate the ways in which Solomon, Dash and Morrison defined water as a maternal site as a means of reimagining Diasporic history and identity. I explored the ways in which mother centred community and transmission is repositioned as the centre in each fiction, via a process of remembering African customs and spirituality. In *The Deep*, I explored the ways in which Solomon constructs a mother centred matrix via her imagining of the Wajinru community, whose societal practices are rooted in images of precolonial water Goddesses as well as African matriarchal social systems. I examined Solomon’s use of ecological metaphor to depict such matriarchy, observing the interrelated social

practices between the Wajinru and other ocean creatures. I argued that Solomon's praxis of reimagining not only redefined and retold a lost African history but also signified the ecofeminist necessity for the natural world to be respected in order for racial and gender equality to be reached. In *Daughters of the Dust*, I inspected Dash's presentation of matriarchal systems which determined the functioning of the island. I illustrated how Dash mapped mother centredness onto the island's watery terrain which metaphorically functioned as a reflexive and reflective tool to reposition Gullah matriarchy as the mainstream social praxis. I defined mother centredness slightly differently when investigating such depictions in *Beloved*. I interrogated Morrison's presentation of breast milk and argued how, throughout the novel, it functions to establish mother centred cultural memory, resisting the erasure of Black history and identity. Approaching breast milk as a watercourse not only illustrated once again how water is inherently maternal, but it also demonstrated how water continues to symbolically function to preserve Black maternity which is constantly under threat.

In my final chapter, I returned to theoretical understandings of Decoloniality and illustrated how water and maternity intersect in each of the three works via a decolonial practice. Investigating how each fiction usurped linear time as well as binary identification was my focus and I approached such observation through consulting Anzalduian notions of hybridity. By investigating how maternity occupied an "in between" space in each of the works, I highlighted how motherhood itself can be radicalised and renegotiated as it becomes separated from colonial practices of linearity and binary construction. In *The Deep* I explored this via the intersection of Queer Posthumanism in which mothering becomes detached from its colonial underpinnings of white, heterosexual femininity. In *Daughters of the Dust* and *Beloved*, I observed how Dash and Morrison displayed maternal circuits of memory as an alternative historical mode to linearity. This simultaneously radicalised motherhood, placing it outside of colonial time constraints, while resisting the centralisation of colonial discourse. I once again observed how such thematic depictions were symbolically displayed through water, which functioned to mediate this breakdown in colonial temporalities.

This thesis has observed that returning to water within the Diasporic expressive tradition poses radical possibilities and potential. By investigating the intersection of water, memory and

maternity via an interrogation of wake work, water sits as a vehicle for radicalisation, reinvention, reimagining and renegotiation within Diasporic fictional practices. I have argued that water is inherently maternal. Approaching watercourses through such symbolism has the potential to reclaim Diasporic memory, identities and history via a reconceptualisation of water and its symbolic attachment to the Middle Passage.

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