

**Of Mimicry And (Wo)Man: The Location of Motherwork in Colonial Mimicry**

Prune Engérant

August 2023

---

*“These childhood experiences represented for me a slow disentangling of threads, a process of disenchantment and disaffiliation, pointing towards a radically different path ahead: an unpleasant experience, replete with gaps, contradictions, evasive silences, guilt and rage.”*

*(Hall 58)*

In his seminal text, *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha defines the concept of colonial mimicry as ‘the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*’ (122). However, whilst such formulation may at first appear to connote a dispossessed figure, mimicry can also be the site of careful critique. Indeed, in contrast to colonial mimesis – in which the subject uncritically espouses colonial frameworks and discourse – colonial mimicry sees colonial assimilation as a conscious strategy of subversion. This essay – through the analysis of Scholastique Mukasonga’s *Our Lady of the Nile* (2018), Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *The Book of Not* (2006) and Stuart Hall’s *Familiar Stranger* (2017) – explores the way in which the difference between colonial mimicry and mimesis is dramatised. My argument, informed by the maternal theories of Patricia Hill Collins, is that the mother-protagonist relationships of these texts act as a site of this divergence. Indeed, I argue that the extent of the protagonists’ ability to successfully negotiate their cultural identity in these (post)colonial spaces is rooted in their respective experiences of motherwork. First explicating the interrelationship between Black motherwork in colonial mimicry, this essay then examines how Virginia’s successful navigation of cultural conflict in *Our Lady of the Nile* correlates with her mother’s supportive attitude. In contrast, Dangarembga’s protagonist demonstrates how the lack of such maternal support can act as a catalyst for colonial mimesis. Finally, the essay explores how Hall’s colonial negotiation and mimicry emerge as a reaction to his mother’s rejection of Black Jamaican identities.

Prior to textual analysis, it is first important to outline the interrelationship between colonial mimicry and Patricia Hill Collins’ maternal theory of Black motherwork. As Collins explains, conceptualisations of Black motherhood are different to that of dominant, White structures. Whilst White motherwork is normally restricted to acts of nurturing, ‘In raising their daughters, Black mothers face a troubling dilemma. To ensure their daughters’ physical

survival, they must teach their daughters to fit into systems of oppression' ('Meaning of Motherhood' 162). This socialisation, Collins notes, is often undertaken through an emphasis on education ('Meaning of Motherhood' 162-3). Significantly, however, this assimilation effort can also lead to an internalisation of oppressive structures. 'Thus,' Collins writes, 'a second dimension of the mothering tradition involves equipping children with skills to confront this contradiction and to challenge systems of racial oppression' ('Shifting the Centre' 183). Cultural negotiation, in which the child is both socialised and simultaneously empowered, is therefore important to successful Black motherwork. This aptly reflects Bhabha's formulation of mimicry, one defined by 'the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power' (122). Andrea O'Reilly, writing on the maternal theories of Toni Morrison, further identifies cultural empowerment through the maternal act of 'cultural bearing' – the generational promotion of pride in ethnic culture (34-5). This cultural pride, however, does not have to be in contradiction with the socialised self. Indeed, historian Elsa Barkley Brown, oft-cited by Collins, explains that 'In the process, one has to define one's self through the interrelationships of *both* of those lives' (8). The consciousness which is inherited thus works to formulate the 'third-space' described by Bhabha—a hybrid identity "which enables other positions to emerge" (qtd. in Rutherford 211). The difference between colonial mimicry and colonial mimesis is thus explored in this essay through the protagonists' respective experiences of Black motherwork.

In *Our Lady of the Nile*, Mukasonga's protagonist, Virginia, embodies Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry. Whilst Virginia's school experience is situated within post-colonial Rwanda, colonial frameworks remain ingrained within her missionary school. Not only are the students prohibited from speaking Swahili (34), but so is this next generation of Rwandan female elite subjected to Eurocentric constructs of femininity. Virginia's

classmates, for example, engage in both skin whitening processes (27) and damaging hair straightening (29). Their school curriculum, consisting of 'Health and Hygiene' and 'Sewing' amongst other subjects, also conditions the students to White formulations of motherhood in which the woman is restricted to the domestic sphere ('Meaning of Motherhood' 154). This patriarchal socialisation is further emphasised by Immaculée's identification of their role as 'fine merchandise' in the diplomatic activities of their fathers and future husbands (132). Indeed, as she notes, the education which they receive ultimately seeks to increase their value within this male-dominated 'marketplace' (132). However, whilst others internalise this colonial framework, Virginia maintains a critical attitude to its structures. Whereas Veronica, Virginia's Tutsi classmate, engages in Fontenaille's anthropological fantasy and appears to desire European fame (160), Virginia instead remarks on the parallel between Fontenaille's behaviour and Rwanda's colonial past. 'The Tutsi,' she says 'have already acted in white men's B movies, or in their craziness, you should say, and we suffered for it' (81). Whilst formulating this critique, however, Virginia simultaneously negotiates a 'colonial self'. As she introduces herself stating 'I'm called Virginia, but my real name is Mutamuriza' (72), Virginia demonstrates a marked distinction between her authentic self and her socialised identity. This recalls the aims of Black motherwork, as described by Collins, in which mothers seek to ensure the physical survival of their children through a taught double-consciousness ('Meaning of Motherhood' 163). In fact, Virginia actively develops this indigenous sense of self alongside her educational success. Distraught by Fontenaille's uprooting of a Tutsi Queen's grave, Virginia pursues an indigenous history keeper, Rubanga, so as to appease Nyiramvura's spirit (162). This act not only ensures her survival by the novel's conclusion but also reflects Virginia's significant desire for an indigenous self in a space which saw, in Mukasonga's own words, the 'demonisation of ancient beliefs and the

ostracisation of their guardians as sorcerers' (Mukasonga interview). Consequently, through her colonial negotiation, Virginia embodies Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry.

Virginia's ability to engage in such cultural negotiation is related to her experience of motherwork. Throughout the novel, Virginia characterises her mother as a source of indigenous cultural bearing.<sup>1</sup> When eating the 'tea and porridge' of the school's refectory, for example, 'Virginia would swallow it with her eyes shut, forcing herself to think of the delicious *ikivuguto* buttermilk her mother prepared for her each morning during vacation' (37). Similarly, Virginia's descriptions of her rural indigenous life to her classmates are often dominated by the figure of her nurturing mother – a source of cultural tradition, food, and proverbs which Virginia adopts (56). This cultural bearing is undertaken concurrently with Leoncia's encouragement of her daughter's White education. Upon her return from the school term, Leoncia publicly demonstrates her pride as she parades Virginia and her school uniform to Hutu and Tutsi neighbours alike (134). She does not, however, restrict her daughter's worth to this educational success – 'But it was out in the field that Leoncia truly appreciated her daughter. No, the white's lycée hadn't changed her. She was the first, before sunrise, to hitch up her wraparound and step barefoot into the mud to wield her hoe' (137). Instead, what Leoncia appears to conceptualise is her daughter's potential hybrid identity, one similar to that theorised by Bhabha as she remarks that 'Virginia was a student, and when you're a student, so she believed, it's as if you're no longer Hutu or Tutsi, but have taken on another 'ethnicity'' (135). Education, she understands, will lead Virginia to transcend an only indigenous identity, a fact which she does not resist. Indeed, Leoncia's successful motherwork is characterised by this receptivity, teaching Virginia that both colonial education and the indigenous self can coexist within the same space. She thus facilitates her daughter's

---

<sup>1</sup> In discussing her own mother's community in an interview, Mukasonga further emphasises the maternal role of cultural bearing as she notes that 'The women were the watchful guardians of tradition': Mukasonga interview.

colonial mimicry, as Collins contends, by providing her daughter with the tools to engage in such negotiation whilst remaining culturally empowered.

In contrast, Tambudzai's mother in Dangarembga's *The Book of Not* acts as a source of tension in her daughter's life. Like Virginia's mother, Mai also belongs to a rural indigenous context. However, whereas Leoncia supports Virginia's pursuit of education, Mai resists this socialisation. She identifies Babamukuru's enrolment of Tambu at Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart – 'A school peopled not be those who looked like us, but by Europeans' (9) – as evidence of his betrayal, subsequently denouncing him to the violent militia of the 'elder siblings' (223). To discourage Tambu from educational pursuit, Mai ensures that Tambu witnesses her uncle's trial and mutilation, leaving her psychologically wounded by the event. Paradoxically, however, Mai simultaneously qualifies her daughter's success through the same colonial structure which she pretends to reject. This is seen through her response to Tambu's work after having failed to achieve high A-Level results:

A-he, Tambudzai! Spending all that time with all those Europeans only to rot in a school that doesn't have form four! And not even youngsters who have an intellect, just any old idiot! *Vasikana*, Tambu, is this a truth of yours, that now you are at a craft school, where people work just with their hands, without any thinking! (235)

Mai's shaming is disorientating and contradictory. She simultaneously denigrates Tambu's education whilst critiquing Tambu's inability to find professional work with those 'who have an intellect' – students at schools like that which Tambu herself attended. The psychic injuries that this mothering leaves her daughter are further illustrated through Tambu's reaction to her earlier O-Level results. As she reflects on her success, she is agonised by her mother's imagined reaction: 'What would Mai do when she heard of my astonishing success? Would she be envious and therefore crudely sarcastic?' (183). Tambu's experience of motherhood is thus devoid of the support and ambivalence that Virginia's mother offers – a

model of motherwork which, as Collins notes, is crucial in ensuring the physical and social survival of children under a dominant, oppressive system.

Tambu's experience of maternal conflict leads her to remove herself from her indigenous context. The homestead, as she perceives it, is no longer home; she cannot 'contemplate going there again having seen the satiation in my mother's eye during Babamukuru's beating (98). This cultural distancing is also depicted in Tambu's school experience as she distances herself from the other Black students and finds herself unable to understand their desire to connect, through both Shona language and music (204). Whilst she does demonstrate an interest in the indigenous philosophy of *unhu*, the effect of her lack of cultural bearing is seen as she applies an individualistic misinterpretation to the concept of collective wellbeing (130; Kennedy 96). As a result of this dispossession, Tambu comes to identify her indigenous self as antagonistic to her education. It is now only through the colonial framework of her school that her value can be confirmed: 'Now with the slip of paper I was to undo all the cords that bound me in the realm of non-being' (222). This dynamic also underlies her desire to achieve the O-Level cup as she perceives the carving of her name in the plate as symbolising 'as though [her name] was something special' (33). However, this approach to education is not critical like that of Virginia but rather reflects mimetic cultural assimilation. In contrast to both Nyasha and Ntombi's subversive intellectual engagement – Nyasha reads Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* in her free time (142) and Ntombi usurps Shakespeare's words to process the execution of her family (209) – Tambu 'lived and breathed and learnt by rote now for a place on the school's roll of honour' (33). The learning content which she engages with is therefore not instrumentalised in the development of her critical consciousness. It is learned for the purpose of academic recognition and attributed little value beyond this aim. Consequently, when Tambu is faced with the loss of the O-Level cup after having achieved the highest results, she is unable to

conceive of the school's prejudiced structure (190). She refuses Ntombi's help and support and instead internalises her failure and subordination under the colonial system. This mimesis ultimately reflects, as Andrea O'Reilley argues in reference to Morrison's work, a reality in which 'children who do not receive the preservation, nurturance, and cultural bearing of motherwork never develop the authentic selfhood Morrison champions and thus grow to be psychologically wounded as adults' (40). Mai's lack of motherwork – such as cultural bearing, empowerment, and support for educational pursuits – thus plays an important role in catalysing Tambu's colonial mimesis.

In contrast to the indigenous maternal contexts of Tambu and Virginia, Stuart Hall's mother is disengaged from her brown Jamaican identity and thus cannot offer cultural bearing. As the 'light-skinned' child of lower-middle-class parents, Jessie is socially adopted into the colonial 'plantation life' of her uncle's 'Norwich' house (5). As Hall recalls, this experience dictates her later cultural sympathies and aspirations, effectively dissociating from her geographical identity in favour of a mimetic espousal of the declining colonial system – 'Improbably, she continued to think of England as her real home. She never used a hairbrush which wasn't an imported Kent, or any face cream but Nivea, or washed with anything but Yardley's soap' (27-8). Her formulation of motherhood, too, embodies that of dominant, White structures. Whilst Tambu and Virginia's mothers reflect conceptualisations of Black motherhood through their participation in rural work (Collins, 'Meaning of Motherhood' 158), Jessie's influence is largely limited to the domestic sphere (5). Through their colonial education, tennis playing, and British foods such as 'eggnog (a Dickensian import)' (30), Jessie thus socialises her children in colonial cultural values and class-inflected attitudes. The extent of this colonial mimesis is seen through Jessie's rejection of the union between her daughter, Patricia, and a 'highly respectable' Black Caribbean medical student as she 'objected to his colour and to his origins,' ultimately leading to Patricia's psychological

breakdown (53). Hall's early desire to interact with Black Jamaican culture is consequently not mediated through his mother's cultural bearing but rather is identified as a rejection of Jessie's values. Indeed, as Hall notes 'Parents form us, both by cultivating us and at the same time by representing [...] those very things we must resist, rebel against, repress, forget or even learn to 'speak' if we are to become subjects in our own right' (22). Indeed, the majority of Hall's memoir is dedicated to the exploration of Hall's feelings of embarrassment, alienation, and anger at his mother's racial 'performance' (28):

These childhood experiences represented for me a slow disentangling of threads, a process of disenchantment and disaffiliation, pointing towards a radically different path ahead: an unpleasant experience, replete with gaps, contradictions, evasive silences, guilt and rage. (58)

The genesis of his cultural navigation is thus established in opposition to his mother.

However, whilst Hall demonstrates a negotiation with the colonial framework through his academic pursuits at Oxford, his maternal experience shapes the machinations of his hybrid identity. Like Bhabha, Hall conceptualises, following his immigration to Britain, a third space in which a hybrid consciousness is developed. Indeed, as he notes, 'my generation discovered that it wasn't necessary to have to choose between the viewpoints of colony and metropole' (92). However, in contrast to the formulation of colonial mimicry present in *Our Lady of the Nile*, Hall's hybrid identity is characterised through negation:

At the core of the diasporic experience is a variant of what W. E. B. DuBois called 'double consciousness': that of belonging to more than one world, of being both 'here' and 'there', of thinking about 'there' from 'here' and vice versa; *of being 'at home' – but never wholly – in both places* [...] It thus entails a very different conception of identity's relation to cultural traditions from that of conventional

notions, *which tend to emphasize remaining true to one's primordial origins and imply continuity, fixity and an unchanging rootedness*' (140-1, emphasis mine)

It is significant that Hall details here a hybrid space dictated not by the plentiful presence of both indigenous self and colonial identity (as with Virginia's colonial mimesis), but rather through the *estrangement* of both identities. This is further made clear as he correlates his own notions of identity to that of the Yoruba artist, Rotimi Fani-Kayode: 'He always insisted that he was what he was *because of*, not in spite of, his lost selves' (22). However, whilst Hall is at times privy to attribute this cultural disconnection to the Caribbean's specific colonial policy – one in which the survival of indigenous culture was proactively prevented from surviving through 'slave auctions', he notes (93) – his experience of motherwork should also be considered. Indeed, in his review of Hall's memoir, Rupert Lewis challenges this understanding of an invariably lost culture. Whilst he agrees that the inheritance of African cultural identity was undeniably constrained by the movements of slavery, he also insists that much of this tradition nonetheless persisted in the Caribbean (562-3). This can be seen, Lewis argues, through the 'Afro-Christian syncretic religions of Latin America and the Caribbean' and the works of authors such as Erna Brodber and Wole Soyinka (563). What Lewis instead identifies in Hall is a class schism – 'Memory works in many ways, of which the deracinated middle class may not have a good grasp' (563). We are thus once more returned to the question of motherhood. Hall's colonial mimicry, formulated through the dynamics of absence, reflects his lack of cultural bearing. Whilst he maintains a desire for this 'real' Jamaica, Hall's hybridity will never be able to counterbalance this experiential loss because 'Black Jamaican sounds that attracted me were, emphatically, from elsewhere, from another Jamaica I didn't inhabit and that was not mine' (34).

As this essay has sought to show, the interrelationship of colonial mimicry and black motherhood offers a productive lens for the analysis of postcolonial literature. This approach,

however, requires black motherhood to be not restricted by dominant (White) formulations but rather to be explored in reference to its specific cultural contexts and tensions. It is by doing so that the importance of Black motherwork – including socialisation and cultural empowerment – is highlighted. As demonstrated in this essay, successful motherwork like that of Leoncia relieves the child from concurrent pressures and facilitates the espousal of a hybrid identity. However, it is important to note in concluding the latter that the aim of this analysis is not to place more responsibility on the Black mother figure. Ultimately, mothers, like their daughters, are also subjected to the intersectional oppression of colonial systems.

*Works Cited*

Bhabha, Homi. 'Of Mimicry and Man.' *Location of Culture*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2004, pp. 121-131.

Brown, Elsa Barkley. 'Mothers of Mind.' *Sage*, vol. 6, no.1, 1989, pp. 4-11.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 'The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships.' *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, 2nd ed., edited by Andrea O'Reilly, Demeter Press, 2021, pp. 153-70.

—. 'Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorizing About Motherhood.' *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, 2nd ed., edited by Andrea O'Reilly, Demeter Press, 2021, pp. 171-92.

Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *The Book of Not*. Faber & Faber, 2021.

Hall, Stuart, and Bill Schwarz. *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*. Edited by Bill Schwarz. London: Penguin Books, 2018.

Kennedy, Rosanne. 'Mortgaged Futures: Trauma, Subjectivity, and the Legacies of Colonialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga's 'The Book Of Not.'" *Studies in the Novel*, vol 40, no. 1, 2008, pp. 86-107.

Lewis, Rupert. "The Making of a Diasporic Intellectual: An Engagement with Stuart Hall's Memoir Familiar Stranger." *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 4, 2020, pp. 560–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2020.1840064>.

Mukasonga, Scholastique. 'Interview with Scholastique Mukasonga.' Interview by Julian Lucas. *The White Review*, October 2020, <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-scholastique-mukasonga/>.

—. *Our Lady of the Nile*. Daunt Books Originals, 2021.

O'Reilly, Andrea. *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, State University of New York Press, 2004.

Rutherford, Jonathan. "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Edited by Jonathan Rutherford. Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 207-21.