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Towards a Black Maternal Praxis of Signification

A growing number of scholars in the Environmental Humanities are emphasizing the need to rethink our relationship with nature, framing this as a narrative process: Lawrence Buell, David Pellow, Stefania Barca, and others have stressed the need for ‘counter-narratives.’ However, Hortense Spillers’s and Sylvia Wynter’s analyses of the dominant onto-epistemic order suggest that the key issue lies deeper, within the norms that guide the meaning-making process. Employing a Black feminist decolonial framework, this article probes the extent to which dominant colonial grammars enforce what Wynter calls a ‘semantic closure principle,’ rendering narratives readable only within Euro-American individualistic frameworks. It will demonstrate the need not merely to recover alternative narratives but to engage with their underlying grammars to rethink the process of signification. To unsettle dominant practices and move towards a decolonial ecology, we need to learn to read via Black women’s maternal grammars.

Keywords: mothering; ecology; African American literature; Black feminism; decolonial studies; environmental humanities

In *Undrowned* (2020), which she defines as her “pragmatic course of study,” “queer Black feminist love evangelist” Alexis Pauline Gumbs performs a mode of reading nature that enables her to “rethink and refeel” her relation to the non-human other in aural terms, escaping dominant ocularcentric modes of knowledge (2). Gumbs’s *Undrowned* reclaims an ancestral maternal practice to perform an oral reading of marine mammals that eludes and troubles colonial visual taxonomies. She places this “*Marine Mammal Apprenticeship*” within a maternal legacy that is passed down via her grandmother’s aural praxis:

my grandmother Lydia Gumbs got a message from some Atlantic bottlenose dolphins too, they inspired her design of the revolutionary flag, seal, and insignia of Anguilla: three bottlenose dolphins swimming in a circle

[...] And though the revolution was short-lived, our listening continues.
(Gumbs 7, italics in original)

For Gumbs, unlearning colonialist ecologies and performing alternative modes of relating to the other starts from a reclamation and reimagination of *maternal praxis* as a relational praxis of signification. Beginning each section with a three-dolphin maternal sign that recurs throughout the book like a maternal refrain, and reinventing the oral skills of her grandmother, Gumbs can relate non-hierarchically and symbiotically to the non-human other, who becomes a co-creator of knowledge. In so doing, she performs a maternal grammar: Her meaning-making is guided by alternative rules of signification that she connects to her maternal line. In her textual praxis, this grammar forms the basis of a decolonial mode of being and inhabiting the Earth based upon a thinking *with*, rather than about, that enables the non-human other to become an active participant in processes of knowledge-making. As Gumbs's text suggests, to change how we approach climate crisis, we need to rethink our relation to the non-human other through a Black maternal grammar. Concerned with the grammars or the organizing principles that determine how elements within a system relate and generate significance, this article argues that Black women's writings challenge a dominant colonialist grammar and rethink the process of signification, putting forward a maternal grammar. They provide an alternative, maternal system of signification, decoupling the 'maternal' from biological reproduction. Treating it as *praxis* rather than identity or biology implies that these process-oriented qualities often devalued under capitalism are cultivatable capacities that anyone can learn to perform.

While in recent years there has been an increased awareness of the climate crisis, we seem unable to bring into being more just and sustainable futures, as current headlines around what has been termed 'The Age of Extinction' demonstrate. From the end of history and slogans such as 'there is no alternative to capitalism,' a language of crisis and failure seems to have become near ubiquitous. Even in literary studies and in the Environmental Humanities a growing number of scholars are emphasizing how the current moment, and the climate emergency in particular, has produced an imaginative crisis. For Ghosh, climate change resists narrative representation in fiction (Ghosh 9). Echoing Amitav Ghosh, David Wallace-Wells has proclaimed, in relation to the current climate catastrophe, that "we suffer from an incredible failure of imagination" (50).

In response to this crisis, some scholars foreground the potential of the literary imagination, looking at 'new' nature writing or turning to postco-

lonial literatures since oppressed and marginalized people have already been forced to live with the so-called ‘end of the world’ for centuries. These scholars emphasize the liberatory potential of the imagination, which, they argue, can offer us new words and new stories with which more equitable and sustainable futures can be imagined. Framing the climate crisis as a narrative and linguistic conundrum to be addressed with the help of the literary imagination, many scholars in the field of the Environmental Humanities often seek an “ecotopian lexicon” and search for “counter-narratives” (Barca 3).¹

While the more pessimistic strand rightly problematizes a utopian reliance on imaginative possibilities, their stance also runs the risk of having a “crippling effect on future-oriented action” given that imagination has a paramount role in ushering possible alternative futures into being (Schneider-Mayerson and Bellamy 4). If no alternative to climate crisis is imaginable then we are doomed to succumb to it. However, the latter more optimistic approach has its limitations as well: While these scholars are right in underlining the potential of subaltern literatures, uncovering new narratives and theorizing a new lexicon are important tasks but not sufficient. Engaging with the challenge of the climate crisis as a “creative problem to be solved in a symbolic way” requires us to confront a deeper issue of which this imaginative closure is merely a symptom.

I concur with the framing of the climate crisis as profoundly linked to a crisis of the imagination that can benefit from an engagement with alternative imaginaries. However, we must go a step further. In this article I argue that we need to employ these imaginaries to critically re-examine and rethink the colonial dynamics that guide the process of signification. If we merely uncover new stories without changing the underlying rules that regulate how narratives acquire meaning, we can only go so far. To some extent, then, the two main strands that I have described are both right: Imagination, and literature in particular, has important limitations *as well as* potential. The key issue lies in the modes we employ to narrativize the world. Thus, we need to tackle the rules that frame and guide the dominant signification process to unthink the limitations set by it as conceived in the dominant order.

Black women have been performing alternative, decolonial Black feminist modes of meaning-making via the maternal grammar theorized in their creative writings. It is to these works that we need to turn our at-

¹ See, for instance, the work of Lawrence Buell; Isabel Pérez-Ramos; Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Bellamy; Marco Armiero and David N. Pellow; Stefania Barca; and Glenn A. Albrecht, among others.

tention if we are to develop a Black feminist decolonial mode of reading with which to tackle the limitations of the dominant literary imagination and be able to not only imagine but inhabit an otherworld or another realm of signification. As exemplified by Gumbs's text, these writings can offer a maternal praxis of signification with which to rethink our relation to the Earth via ecosophies of care rooted in a maternal grammar of symbiotic relationality. Since this alternative maternal grammar disrupts the dominant process of signification, achieving proficiency in it is the key to unthink what is being dubbed, across multiple disciplines, an 'imaginative failure' to conceptualize alternative futures. To go beyond the current impasse, mirrored in the ubiquity of a language of crisis, a complete rethinking of the rules that guide the dominant praxis of signification is required.

Drawing on Julia Kristeva's psycholinguistic framework, Henry Louis Gates's theorization of the African American practice of Signifying, and Black feminist analyses of slavery, I begin this article by discussing fundamental questions that relate to the process of signification: How does something meaningless and illegible become meaningful and legible, and vice versa? Can the supposedly univocal and fixed relation between the signifier and signified be unsettled? What does maternal praxis have to do with this? Showing how Hortense Spillers's analysis of the process of enslavement and Gates's theorization of the African American praxis of Signifying problematize Kristeva's framework, I elaborate an alternative theoretical model for understanding the process of signification and its relation to maternal praxis. Considering the role of racial taxonomies and positing the process of enslavement as foundational, this model addresses the creation of psycholinguistic 'excess' – what is excluded and made illegible to sustain the legibility of the dominant order of meaning.

I then proceed to theorize the Black maternal praxis of signification that can be found in Black women's writings to not only recognize but also unsettle this dynamic, rendering imaginable otherworldly ecosophies of care. Thinking *with* Black feminist theory reveals that the erasure of Black mothering offers the condition of possibility for a dominant colonial order based upon the exploitation of both the human and non-human other. Concluding with an overview of the ways in which Black women's literatures often reclaim ancestral diasporic traditions to envision a fugitive ecosophy steeped in a maternal grammar of Black social life, I demonstrate its potential to reimagine the process of signification.

A White Patriarchal Grammar

In both reading and writing, meaning-making is made possible through the validation of one type of meaning at the expense of other possibilities, which are discarded. It thus produces what is constructed as ‘excess.’ But what are the dynamics that rule this process and how are they connected to race, gender, and the environment? As will become clear from the following discussion, in the dominant symbolic order, this excess is represented by the Black maternal as a praxis of life. This becomes the discarded and erased ‘excess’ that sustains a dominant praxis of signification ruled by a white patriarchal grammar based upon racial, gender, and environmental violence. As such, it is from Black mothering that we need to start if we want to rethink the dominant order of meaning.

According to Julia Kristeva, the symbolic order is the paternal realm of signification governed by logos and the law of non-contradiction, where meaning is possible. By contrast, the semiotic is a maternal realm before signification: to enter language one must repress the maternal. This, for Kristeva, is “the founding separation of the sociosymbolic contract” (58). The semiotic constitutes a pre-discursive libidinal economy, or a preverbal realm linked to chaos and meaninglessness. While it does resurface, it nonetheless remains subordinate to the paternal or symbolic. Much like psychoanalysis, Kristeva’s work has its limitations: Kristeva’s framework, as Judith Butler and others have argued, assumes a culture-specific understanding of language and the maternal. Rather than shunning her work altogether, I put it in dialogue with decolonial, African American and Black feminist scholars, such as Gates, Spillers, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, to rethink it.

The symbolic and semiotic, I argue, might be more productively understood as two different but related *practices* of signification. The symbolic is one in which signifier and signified are locked into a univocal relation of correspondence that forecloses multiplicity of meaning. The semiotic, by contrast, constitutes a different praxis of signification where meanings multiply but without ensuing the breakdown of social and cultural life, as Kristeva would have it. The semiotic is not and does not have to be meaningless or subordinate; if it is so, it is because it has been constructed as such. As Santos has argued, Western modernity functions according to what he calls “abyssal thinking,” which depends upon the construction of an “other side” made illegible (78). Hence, the symbolic as the dominant signifying practice depends upon the relegation of the semiotic/maternal realm to the other side, that of enforced illegibility. In the

symbolic order of Western modernity, the dominant praxis of signification constructs its meaning upon hierarchical dichotomies while simultaneously discarding the excess of meaning so created to a corresponding realm of illegibility.

In this schema, as Spillers has demonstrated, it is Black mothering that constitutes the “principal point of passage between the human and non-human” (“Interstices” 45), between the legible and illegible. Since the dominant system links Black mothering to social death, it is specifically the illegibility of Black mothering *as* a praxis of Black social life that in this hegemonic system comes to function as the semantic excess upon which its legibility is based. Within the dominant Western onto-epistemic scheme, hegemonic constructions of the human and non-human become legible (or illegible) as such via a resignification of Black mothering, which becomes tethered to the production of social death. By contrast, the switching of this sign or its resignification as one of social life allows entrance into a maternal otherworld – a different realm of signification whose constructed illegibility is the condition of possibility for the hegemonic order’s legibility.

If, as Jennifer C. Nash has argued, racial ideology depends upon a failure to imagine Black mothering “as life-giving” (164), then the dominant meaning-making process rests upon a similar imaginative collapse. This semantic closure, which Wynter, in her afterword “Beyond Miranda’s Meaning,” theorizes as the founding one of the Western onto-epistemic scheme, goes back to the dynamics established during slavery. Directly linking this illegibility to the plantation, in her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Spillers has underlined how the brutal anti-Black grammar of slavery resignifies the maternal as a praxis for capital accumulation. It is in the symbolic order of the plantation that Black mothering becomes attached to the reproduction of, to use Orlando Patterson’s term, “social death” (33). This symbolic order, entrenched in the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, governs New World Slavery and makes possible a violent onticide of Black being. The process of enslavement, as scholars have shown, imposes a forced uniformity across the realms of the animate and inanimate. As Spillers has shown, erasing “[e]very feature of social and human differentiation,” its brutal American grammar of description ungenders and dehumanizes enslaved people, transforming them into abstract quantities that become metaphors for value (“Mama’s Baby” 75).

Contending that history seems to show no movement, Spillers observes that the enslavers’ brutal grammar of description, “grounded in the

originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation” enabled by the erasure and co-optation of mothering, continues to be “the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation” (“Mama’s Baby” 68). While Spillers understands ‘grammar’ as the basis of the hegemonic way of thinking regarding race and gender, I expand her term to refer to the dominant set of narrative schemas that guide the process of signification. What Hartman has called the ‘afterlife of slavery’ manifests not only in health disparities, housing discrimination, unemployment but also in the dominant lens through which we generate meaning.

Linked to the racial dynamics of the plantation, the illegibility of Black mothering as a praxis of social life joins together the dominant symbolic order and the otherworld in a paradoxical relation of simultaneous identity and difference: identity because the otherworld is subsumed into the hegemonic order (it can be made meaningless only if read according to the hegemonic rules), and difference because it is constructed as the abjected, discarded ‘other’ to the norm. It is both inside and outside. Echoing and extending the dynamics of the plantation, the dominant grammar tethers Black mothering to social death and renders this maternal otherworld readable only as a dead-bound realm of meaninglessness. In so doing, the dominant system perpetuates the ontological annihilation of Black life and renders the human isomorphic to Man, precluding alternatives.

These dynamics of signification, based upon maternal erasure and co-optation, are also central for understanding the practices of environmental violence that characterize the Plantationocene, a geological era marked by the Atlantic slave trade and New World slavery, and their relation to racial terror. Talking about the socio-historical context of the Caribbean, Malcolm Ferdinand employs the expression “matricides of the Plantationocene” to address what he calls the “colonial double fracture,” that is, the tendency to discuss issues of racial and environmental violence separately, as if they had no relation to one another. According to him, the colonial inhabitation of the Earth, founded upon an exploitation of the human and non-human other, brought not only ecosystemic changes but also a shift in the understanding of the Earth: “The colonized land is no longer a Mother-Earth: it is a *land-without-manman*, a *motherless land* [...] A land whose referential belief system made it a womb, a matrix, that is no more” (Ferdinand 45). As his discussion suggests, according to a colonial understanding of the Earth, enslaved people are constructed as “those who do not inhabit” since their practices of inhabitation are not recognized as such in the hegemonic order. While my interpretation tallies with Ferdin-

and's focus on the maternal, I argue that environmental violence can be better understood in terms of the erasure and co-optation of mothering rather than matricide. This more accurately reflects how the Earth is re-conceptualized as a maternal womb whose nurturing potentialities are exploited and used for the reproduction of those who are recognized as inhabiting those lands according to the dominant order. By contrast, the relation to the Earth of those who are conceptualized as not inhabiting, that is, those who are relegated to what Wynter has termed the "Archipelago of Human Otherness," is resignified as a sign of symbolic death ("Unsettling" 260). In the hegemonic order, enslaved people's modes of knowing the land become illegible as sources of life and invalidated as meaningless.

These dynamics echo and extend the maternal resignification that the process of enslavement performed, linking environmental and racial violence. Thus, the construction of the Earth as a maternal space does not function, as Carolyn Merchant argued, as a "cultural constraint" against the exploitation of the Earth; rather this idea is employed to simultaneously facilitate the degradation of both the human and non-human other. In a dynamic reminiscent of that found in New World Slavery, the conceptualization of the Earth as mother is co-opted and resignified so that it becomes legible as a sign of ontological reality only for white subjects who are deemed entitled to its exploitation. In the dominant order, the Black subject's connection to what is constructed as a now economized maternal space is rendered legible only as a sign of perceived 'lack,' becoming meaningless and illegible as a source of Black social life and alternative modes of being. In John Muir's *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (1870), while his merging with nature allows him to be reborn through a sublime experience of wilderness, Black people are connected to the land only to be remade as 'other-than-human.' His text constructs the Earth as a site for the self-reproduction of white subjectivity, while resignifying such relation as one of ontological annihilation for the Black subject. The practices of wilderness conservation, which Muir advocated, emerge as a mode for the reproduction of whiteness that echoes and extends the dynamics of the plantation, rendering illegible Black ecologies as praxes of social life. This constructed illegibility makes possible the exploitation of both the human and non-human other, entrenching an extractive relation to the other as an 'excess' that, devalued and objectified, can be capitalized on. In the hegemonic order of meaning, this 'excess' can only become legible according to self-serving, utilitarian, and indi-

vidualistic frameworks: A Black maternal praxis of symbiotic relationality with the Earth is erased.

To go beyond the meaning-making limitations enforced by the dominant white patriarchal grammar of the colonial symbolic order we need to make legible what it makes illegible. This calls for a complete rethinking of the dominant mode of signification: Trying to make sense of this maternal otherworld according to the rules of signification pertinent to the dominant colonial symbolic order can result in chaos and meaninglessness. For both orders to co-exist in a realm of legibility without any hierarchical relation, a proficiency in different modes of signification is required.

A Maternal Double-Voice

African American and decolonial scholars have emphasized the sense of doubling that Black people experience in a racist world. W. E. B. Du Bois coined the term “double-consciousness” to describe the mode of experiencing reality that racism brutally forced upon Black subjects. Frantz Fanon remarked how Black people have been given two frames of reference within which they have had to place themselves. Drawing upon these insights, Wynter has also described the paradoxical experience of both being and non-being (“Unsettling” 268). Many texts in the African American literary tradition creatively reflect upon this duality of experience: Starting from its origins in the antebellum slave narratives, this literary tradition has often been preoccupied with the sense of doubleness that anti-Black racism generates. African American women’s literature has frequently found in this doubleness a potential loophole towards an otherworld, connecting it to a reclamation of maternal praxis. Harriett Jacobs’s narrativization of her ‘loophole of retreat’ in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) constitutes a case in point. In that paradoxical maternal space that she narratively re-constructs, Jacobs’s alter ego, Linda Brent, is both alive and dead, mothering and not-mothering, simultaneously in and outside the enslaver’s order. It is only in such a place, where oppositions no longer hold, that Linda can temporarily escape slavery’s co-optation of the maternal and redeem her children in absentia. The motherless state into which the narrator is left by slavery prompts her retrieval of mothering, and her reimagination of freedom as a reclamation of maternal praxis. As P. Gabrielle Foreman has observed, in Jacobs’s text, association with the mother results in “freedom rather than enslave-

ment,” overturning the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* (322). In Jacobs’s otherworld mothering is resignified as a source of freedom and social life rather than death.

This doubling of meaning affects African American practices of signification as well, impacting the ways in which language itself is employed, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has shown. Chiming in with these remarks but applying them to an analysis of language, he has argued that African American texts are frequently “double-voiced,” alluding to the co-existence in them of two parallel discursive universes. This double-voicedness is achieved via what he calls “Signifying,” a literary technique that builds upon an extremely complex and learned praxis of language use consisting in rhetorical games. Originating in a “(re)naming ritual that took place in antebellum America” (86), this praxis unsettles the conventions of formal language use and has a subversive potential.

While Gates’s work is usually discussed in reference to his theory of Signifying as a complex form of African American intertextuality, his nuanced discussion of rhetorical practices of signification in relation to African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which grounds his theory, is often overlooked. According to him, AAVE and Standard American English constitute “two parallel discursive universes” that function according to different rules of signification (85). The complex use of language in the African American praxis of Signifying disturbs the level of the signifier:

We bear witness here to a protracted argument over the nature of the sign itself, with the black vernacular discourse proffering its critique of the sign as the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconscious. (87)

But this “difference that blackness makes” (89) is linked to Black mothering, which, as we have seen, can mark one point of passage between two different modes of signification. As such, Black mothering becomes one locus of liminality, a threshold where the ambiguous doubling of meanings that Du Bois theorized, and Gates linguistically analyzed, acquires salience. This unleashes a fugitive potential, as Jacobs’s narrative suggests: It is here that we find “the trace of an extended engagement between two separate and distinct yet inextricably related orders of meaning” (89) and the key to another mode of signification – a loophole towards a maternal otherworld.

While in the dominant order mothering as life-giving praxis is made illegible, through their practices Black people have historically been able

to perform a resignification of this sign as a source of Black life. Even in antebellum America, Black people did cultivate nurturing relationships, as historians have shown, managing to forge and maintain nurturing bonds of love both to each other and to the environment. Stephanie Camp documented not only the brutal restrictions that slaveholders violently imposed upon enslaved women or what she described as their “geography of containment,” but also the “rival geography” that these women managed to create. Patricia Hill Collins has also foregrounded the central role of communal mothering or “othermothering” in Black diasporic communities. Often devalued in the dominant order, these practices constitute a different order of meaning as they perform a re-signification of mothering not as a sign of ‘lack’ but as one of fugitive potentialities for the reimagination of what it means to be and inhabit.

Black women’s writing often returns to and reimagines these ancestral practices and traditions, rewriting and unthinking the dominant order’s signifying rules and its rigid hierarchical categories via their maternal grammar. Reclaiming and reimagining these ancestral practices, Black women’s literature re-signifies them as relational praxes of being untethered from social death. Their works are double voiced in the sense that they navigate two modes of signification: Much like the practice of Signifying theorized by Gates, they elaborate a discursive universe that unsettles dominant rules of signification. They make the other side not only visible but legible, rendering imaginable a maternal otherworld where meaning-making can be performed anew. They operate at the semantic level as they perform an emptying of the signifier and a (re)filling of it with new concepts; but in so doing, they theorize a maternal grammar, or a new set of organizing principles in which meaning results from relational and embodied symbiotic processes of care.

Black women’s maternal grammars perform an alternative signifying praxis that unsettles a colonial mode of meaning-making, making legible the ecosophies of care that the dominant practice obscures. Performing alternative praxes of being founded upon a maternal grammar of signification, Black women’s literatures also theorize a different, decolonial mode of inhabitation. Maryse Condé’s novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (originally published in French in 1986), while rarely discussed for its environmental concerns, frames Tituba’s gardening practice as a maternal praxis that recalls the ecological dimensions of maroonage: Central to such alternative practices of placemaking was a refusal to think of nature as property and a reclamation of discarded land. This maternal grammar becomes not only a grammar of being but also a spatial gram-

mar that has the potential to unthink the racial and environmental violence of the Plantationocene. It can provide the tools to decolonize dominant environmental imaginaries and their colonial modes of being and inhabiting. In Gloria Naylor's novel, *Mama Day* (1988), words and landscapes lose their visual reference, as is the case for the island of Willow Springs, which, being "in no state" (24), cannot be located anywhere, acquiring a fugitive potentiality reminiscent of Jacobs's loophole of retreat. The map and bill of sale that open the novel are given another meaning through the oral narratives that circulate on the island and that only the initiates can understand. Drawing attention to the aural characteristics of the writing, the circular structure and vernacular language of Naylor's text allow meaning to arise mainly from the oral and folkloric sources erased in colonial archives. Juxtaposing the visual and oral from the very first pages, Naylor's writing creates textual dynamics that unsettle colonial ones where the visual tends to predominate. Urging the reader to engage with the maternal soundscape of her writing, the orality embedded in her novel gives new meaning to the visual tools, such as the maps and charts with which it starts, that signify upon those of the colonial ocularcentric archive. At the same time, her resignification of such visual tools anticipates the contemporary reimagining of Photovoice and oral community map-making in Black feminist environmental research, such as that of K. Amimahaum Ducre, which is based on similar dynamics of signification to those found in Naylor's text. As Naylor's research materials for the novels show (among these there are numerous maps of the US as well as numerous research papers on plants, the environment, folkloric knowledge, etc.), hers is a narrative in which spatial and environmental knowledges are central; but their modalities of signification are rewritten via the oral to allow access to a maternal otherworld.

What kind of decolonial ecologies, then, can become legible via Black women's maternal grammar? This article hopes to contribute to a conversation around the ecological potential of Black women's literatures and their maternal grammar of signification.

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