

Theses of the PhD dissertation

**Mothers in the Wake of Slavery:
The Im/possibility of Motherhood in Post-1980
African American Women's Prose**

Lénárt-Muszka Zsuzsanna

Supervisor: Dr. Bülgözdi Imola



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies

Debrecen, 2021

A. Identifying the aims and the subject of the dissertation

The aim of this dissertation is to respond to a void in the scholarship in the field of contemporary literary criticism: reading motherhood in a subset of the corpus of post-1980 African American women's prose in the primary frameworks of Black feminism and Afropessimism while also being informed by trauma theory, motherhood studies, and intersectionality, I highlight the importance of the reverberations of enslavement on early maternal embodiment. I analyze the ways in which the selected novels and short stories that I call *mothertexts*—"The Abortion" (1982) by Alice Walker, *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams, *Push* (1996) by Sapphire, *Conception* (2008) by Kalisha Buckhanon, "Harvest" (2010) by Danielle Evans, and *Salvage the Bones* (2011) by Jesmyn Ward—foreground the dual nature of maternal possibilities and impossibilities. Before providing the socio-cultural and literary context of the post-1980 corpora of Black feminist theory, criticism, and fiction, I briefly establish the fact that womanhood and motherhood have been culturally problematic concepts in the framework of white feminism as well. I establish that motherhood has been posited as a contested terrain both on the social and the individual level—mostly for white women, by white men and women.

Next, I give an overview of the dominant views and representations of Black mothers, which is necessary to highlight the novelty of the *mothertexts* that I discuss in the thematic chapters (with more in-depth discussions of the relevant issues in each individual chapter). Reviewing the history from Black motherhood since the beginning of slavery, with reflections on various reductive controlling images (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 350) of Black women that have ossified into stereotypes, I demonstrate that African American mothers have been in a singular position, which literature tried to portray while dismantling a host of controlling images in the process.

I briefly chart the history and main features of prose written by *and* about Black women—with a focus on depictions of womanhood and motherhood—in order to situate the

corpus under analysis within the tradition of Black women's writing. The objective of this review is to underline that while pre-1980 Black women's writing did reflect on the social position and experiences of the Black woman and mother, it did not yet have the focus on the embodied aspects of early motherhood that the corpus in my dissertation is based on.

When introducing my chosen corpus and the texts I excluded from consideration, I argue that while my selected corpus started to emerge in the 1980s, the undeniably taboo-breaking nature of the 1970s needs to be acknowledged in order to understand the tendencies of the following decade, in which, due to emerging feminist voices, the corporeal aspects of womanhood and motherhood were no longer taboo. I discuss the social, cultural, political, and academic forces that impacted mainstream women's writing and theory since the 1970s and demonstrate that Black feminist and womanist theorizing and Black feminist literary criticism made significant strides following the Civil Right Movement and Black Arts movement. These changes contributed to a corpus of Black women's writing, which gained popularity beginning in the 1970s. Many works by Black female novelists in the 1980s began to tackle narrating the experiences of the previously muted group of Black mothers, forming a subset of the post-1970 corpus delineated above. They subvert the imperative contained within the matrilineal tradition insofar as the female characters they portray are not concerned with the legacy of their mothers; instead, they concentrate on the difficulties of coming to terms with the physical and psychological burdens of motherhood.

The tight thematic link between these novels and short stories counterbalances the relatively wide timespan: all explore what the embodied experience of motherhood feels like when it happens to an already traumatized, fragmented Black female body. In doing so, they contextualize motherhood in either slavery or its afterlife, amid social, familial, and gynecological violence as well as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in order to reckon with the reverberations of slavery and shed light on the continuous trauma caused by racism. They

also re-appropriate and reflect on stereotypes connected to Black women and mothers (Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Matriarch, Welfare Queen, and Urban Teen Mother), and highlight the importance of female solidarity. The pervasive erasure of Black mothers' stories and subjectivities throughout history reverberates in the fiction of the past few decades not simply as a renewed interest but as a lack, a void at the same time: even though plots often heavily rely on pregnancy and childbirth, happy mothers are few and far between in this corpus. Just as Black maternal suffering and the severing of the mother-child bond in slave narratives seem inevitable, the novels and short stories under analysis portray ruptures in mother-child relationships as well. Nevertheless, these works explore the trauma related to motherhood and its healing potential as well. Through thematizing motherhood, the texts aim to reclaim the collective trauma of Black women by invoking slavery directly or indirectly, thereby problematizing mainstream historiography as well as disrupting and re-appropriating the cultural master-narrative in order to heal the trauma of Black motherhood.

B. An outline of the employed methods

In order to interpret the depths of the early, traumatized, embodied, biological motherhood trope, I reflect on the stance Black feminist theoreticians have taken with regards to motherhood (for a more detailed analysis of the relevant tenets see the individual chapters). I provide an overview of how pre- and post-Emancipation motherhood has been theorized within the discipline of Black studies especially after 1970.

The idea that even though slavery ended quite some time ago but still affects Black people has been put forward by multiple scholars within the discipline of Black studies, both in literary criticism and theory, but it has been done most prominently by Afropessimists. Afropessimism is an interpretive framework or metatheory (Wilderson, *Afropessimism* 14) that allows for considering Blackness and slavery in ontological terms; its practitioners, US-based

or not, include representatives of various scholarly fields. Frank Wilderson builds on Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of *naturally alienated* and generally dishonored persons" (Patterson 13, emphasis mine), which derives from the three constituent elements of slavery: total powerlessness enforced by continuous and gratuitous violence (2-5); natal alienation, that is, legal, genealogical and cultural isolation from close and remote ancestors and descendants (5-7); and the generalized condition of dishonor, meaning a lack of public worth and a name (10-11). Relying on the work of, among others, Spillers and Hartman, Wilderson expands on the definition of slavery and argues that Black slavery is not simply an event, an experience, or a condition to which people of any walk of life can be subjected, but a permanent condition of banishment from ontology (Wilderson, *Red, White and Black* 18). While forced labor and the curtailment of mobility were indeed common features of enslavement, they do not explain the power relations that subtend the conceptual make-up of colonialism. The Black person, according to Wilderson, is "an individual who is by definition always already void of relationality" and "socially dead in relation to the rest of the world" (18).

Accordingly, as Hartman explains, it is not merely a voluntary fixation or the weight of memory that have to account for the effect of slavery on present-day Black life; instead, "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (*Lose Your Mother* 6). That is, the afterlife of slavery refers to a present-tense environment in which "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" prevail (6) in supposedly post-racial times as well, when one's racial background is said to impertinent vis-à-vis social equality. Christina Sharpe, building on the work done by Hartman and other Afropessimists, uses the conceptual metaphor of the wake as a multi-faceted, post-traumatic state, practice, or process. She enumerates the literal meanings of this word: wake, for example, can refer to mourning and "rituals through which to enact grief and memory" (20), or states of disturbance,

as in the air current behind a plane or the change in water behind a ship or a body (20), calling to mind the prevalence of contemporary racialized gun violence and the Middle Passage alike. Since the presence of what *was* on what *remains* is integral to the meaning of the wake, Sharpe argues that wakes are states characterized by the interplay of seemingly distinct temporal frames: “in the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present” (8), much like in Hartman’s formulation of the afterlife.

If the specifics of Black subjection have changed but the subjection itself has remained in place, then, wonders Sharpe, “what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation” (14). Wake work, she says, might enable Black people to imagine novel ways to survive and even thrive in the afterlife of slavery (17), that is, to “inhabit[] and ruptur[e] this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (17). She uses “the wake in all of its meanings as a means of understanding how slavery’s violences emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance” (14), that is, the wake is as much about survival as it is about the conditions which cause the need to struggle for that survival.

Comparably, Kevin Everod Quashie, while not readily associated with Afropessimism, attends to the ways in which the institution of slavery affects the construction of motherhood today. Quashie argues that due to the structural inequalities inherent in white supremacist societies, Black motherhood is “a hard-to-bear responsibility that begins with inevitable despair and failure: if being a good mother is to secure the best for one’s child, the Black mother cannot be a good mother and can hardly be a mother at all” (66).

The supplementary theoretical frameworks of the dissertation include trauma theory, since not only Afropessimism, but both clinical and non-clinical theories of trauma acknowledge the impact of enslavement on the mental and physical wellbeing of the enslaved and their descendants as well. This dissertation is also informed by an additional theoretical

framework, that of motherhood studies. An emerging interdisciplinary academic field, it has endeavored to theorize motherhood in diverse ways, and to bridge the gap between academics and non-academic activists and mothers, thus influencing mainstream discussions of motherhood (Kawash 973). Furthermore, recognizing that the interlocking oppressions of gender and race form a unique matrix in which Black women have been situated since colonial times—as it follows from my analyses above—necessitates employing an intersectional framework. Kimberlé Crenshaw states that “Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender” (“Demarginalizing” 140) and argues for an intersectional lens that can illuminate “the complexities of compoundedness” that structure discrimination and disempowerment (166).

C. The results of the dissertation

In *Dessa Rose*, the protagonist heals from various kinds of trauma and is reunited with her family, but impossibility is still imbricated in her motherhood: while motherhood is capable of engendering new possibilities of healing, it is still lived in (the wake of) chronic, individual, transgenerational, and communal trauma, which Dessa is very much aware of: her compulsion to keep telling her story and her wish that the children remember it attest to the precarity of Black existence and to the need to hold a wake to all that has been lost.

After going through the process of enfreakment and unfreakment, Precious in *Push* is indeed the best mother possible; however, she dies young due to her illness, and her son ends up a victim who then slowly transforms into a victimizer. Thus, *Push* illuminates the notion of the im/possibility of being a good mother: her effort, while being extraordinary and leading up to a (short-lived) catharsis, cannot negate the multifaceted effects of deep-rooted structural issues.

Imani in “The Abortion” and Angel in “Harvest” make different decisions: terminating her pregnancy brings Imani some peace, while keeping the baby makes Angel feel rejuvenated. Neither story is one of unquestionable triumph over the impossibility of Black motherhood, but Angel’s affirmation of the pregnancy and Imani’s abortion do confront the im/possibility of Black motherhood and constitute resistance in the face of racism, representing a healing potential in the wake.

Conception, through its complex structure and reliance on disrupted temporality, reconfigures the afterlives of slavery by foregrounding the (after)lives of the unborn child, which generate new possibilities and hope in the face of tragedies, thus shedding light on the duality of im/possibilities prevalent in the other mothertexts as well.

Salvage the Bones mobilizes the im/possibility of Black life and motherhood to portray the impact of the systemic denial of dignity to Black mothers that frames Esch’s self-perception. The volatility of the weather is also foregrounded: the literal sense of weather, through the impending hurricane, intersects with its metaphorical meanings through the debilitating, weathering effects of the racist social climate that consigns the Batistes to the Pit. The wake of the hurricane and the wake of slavery thus coalesce to produce a uniquely vulnerable position for Esch and her baby, in which the restorative potential of her decision remains in question.

My contention is that not only the approaches to portraying early motherhood but the conspicuity itself with which this topic is present in fiction written by *and* about Black women since the 1980s is to be attributed to the afterlife of slavery. A subcorpus of post-1980 Black female-centered fiction zooms in on the new mother and addresses her joys and struggles in no uncertain terms. The writers of the mothertexts under analysis and their characters face unique struggles that differ even from those of other minorities. Their circumstances frame how they perceive their motherhood; Blackness, through (the afterlife of) slavery, impacts the ways these

young mothers make decisions regarding becoming or staying pregnant as well as navigating the bodily and psychic ramifications of early motherhood.

Beside their age, there are few common features these characters share. As far as their socio-economic background is concerned, most—but not all—are destitute. However, as argued in the respective chapters, financial means are no guarantee when it comes to either corporeal suffering or the effects of a wider white supremacist environment. Even though the protagonists' experiences with motherhood stem from the intersections of their circumstances, Blackness is the determinant with the most profound impact on it.

Regarding plot development in the mothertexts, as elucidated in the thematic chapters, becoming—or not becoming—a mother is a primary decision or process that drives narrative development and adds further dimensions to all the stories. While later stages and various forms of motherhood are discussed in many mothertexts, significantly, it is early motherhood that is present in all of them. Therefore, the pregnancies, childbirths, abortions, nursing, and even the decisions to become or not to become a mother drive and structure the plots to the extent that without these events, states, or attitudes, the narrative arcs would dramatically differ from their current state, or these stories as such would be unrecognizably different without them.

The mothertexts bring into relief the im/possibility of Black motherhood that stems from the Black experience as described by Afropessimists: if slavery involves natal alienation (Patterson 5-7) and is a condition entailing social death and banishment from ontology (Wilderson, *Red, White and Black* 18), then the Black woman is left with impossible choices in an ever-hostile environment that stresses and traumatizes her before she even considers becoming a mother. The main novelty of this dissertation lies in identifying and tracing this trope of im/possibility in the subcorpus. While all the stories have endings that are carefully crafted to instill a sense of optimism in the reader, I demonstrate that they also reflect on the im/possibility of Black motherhood: even though the mothers do forge a unique path for

themselves that may leave them with a sense of contentment or even euphoria at the conclusion of the plot, a consideration of the gaps in the texts reveals the disruption and impossibility of Black motherhood. Kevin Quashie's claim that "the Black mother cannot be a good mother and can hardly be a mother at all" (66) thus means that in spite of the regenerative possibilities that becoming a mother may open up, impossibility is still very much a part of the reality of the characters, as corroborated by either the respective narrators' overt reflections on a racist and misogynistic environment or subtle clues in the descriptions of the diegetic world. The characters fight for their 'being' in a society or community that fails to acknowledge their humanity, thereby facing not only im/possibility but those interstitial modes of un/freedom and non/being that I touch upon in the chapter "Theoretical Underpinnings and Method." Through a process in which motherhood plays a crucial part, they all eventually claim their right to being, which is not to say that their respective environments will also recognize their humanity.

The fact that some characters stake a claim to 'being,' acquire narrative authority, carve out agency, or shape a community around them seems to be at odds with some of the axioms of Afropessimism, which holds that the Black individual is excluded from civic life, is always a ghost-like figure on the periphery, or, at the very best, the Black body is interesting so far as it is in pain or sexualized. Indeed, Wilderson argues that it is impossible for our current Western white supremacist society to fully recognize the Black person's personhood. Hartman considers it "obscene" to celebrate the political "agency" and "autonomy" of dominated groups in a "terrorizing state apparatus," against the backdrop of "the ravages and the brutality of the last few centuries" ("The Position of the Unthought" 185-186), that is, she cautions against taking comfort in the existence of an optimistic narrative and a redemptive historical paradigm that emphasize developments in the area of, for example, civil rights. She does permit, however, that a degree of personal (if not political) agency might exist even in bondage (*Scenes* 6), and acknowledges the individual or communal efforts of those who were excluded, dismissed, or

relegated to the margins yet rebelled openly and lived unconventional, “wayward” lives (“A Note on Method” in *Wayward Lives*)—that is, in lieu of structural change, smaller-scale initiatives do exist and survival does take place. In a similar vein, Jared Sexton maintains that there *is* Black social life and inner life that is lived outside of or against Black social death (“The Social Life” par. 15); in fact, he urges a move away from the “oft-noted dialectic of slavery and freedom” and toward conceptualizing Black social death and Black social life “less as opposites and more as conditions of an impossible possibility” (“Ante-Anti-Blackness”). Other Afropessimists also concede that there has been *some* change, for example, Sharpe asserts that “the means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain” (14).

Sharpe also asks what is it that survives social death, exclusion, and non-being (14); her *In the Wake* project hinges on the note of survival that exists at the same time as social death and ontological negation, the resistance that exists in the face of immanent and imminent Black death, and the possibility that exists at the same time as impossibility, which is exactly the ambiguity I aim to capture in my dissertation. To return to my earlier examples, Dessa acquires narrative authority—she comes to consider her story worthy of being told, retold, recorded, and remembered—but she is fully aware that it will be questioned, dismissed, or misunderstood by those outside of her loved ones. Yet, she looks for possibility in the face of this impossibility. As explained in the thematic chapters, the narrators express or at least hint at the possibility that the characters’ newly found or forged agency, self-image, or sense of triumph might be questioned by their white supremacist environment at any minute. Thus, while there exists a certain degree and kind of personal agency that the characters can acquire or a community they can build or join, according to Afropessimism, these will always be limited, incomplete, transitory, fleeting, or in potential danger—different from what those in civic life can have. The conclusions of the thematic chapters point toward this in-betweenness that comes about when

something survives an ontological negation, and what the mothertexts' characters are left with is un/survival, non/being, and im/possibility.

Im/possibility also pertains to the how the mothertexts relate to the literary canon on the whole. Undoubtedly, it would be naïve to assume that racism has vanished from the establishment and the readership, that is, while the “means and modes” have changed, the “fact” remains. Still, as Black female- and mother-centered fiction and other types of art are entering the mainstream, attempts by Black women to inscribe their version of history into official accounts are becoming more and more successful. Many Black feminist thinkers and Afropessimists, however, caution against being overly optimistic and argue that instead of being involved in a linear progress narrative, African American people are still enclosed in a space of non/being and un/survival very much reminiscent of enslavement. Sherley Anne Williams argues that “‘History’ is often no more than who holds the pen at a given point in time. I hold the pen now, and that is what authenticates me and my children.” (“Lion’s History” 258). Williams might hold the pen and authenticate herself and her children, but the extent to which her efforts indeed make history and truly disrupt historiography can be debated. In other words, Black women’s literature, including the works of the subcorpus delineated in this dissertation, still occupies an in-betweenness—an im/possibility.



Registry number: DEENK/351/2021.PL
Subject: PhD Publication List

Candidate: Zsuzsanna Lénárt-Muszka
Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies
MTMT ID: 10055821

List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language international book chapters (1)

1. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** The Abnormal Body in Push by Sapphire.
In: Contemporary Perspectives on Language, Culture and Identity in Anglo-American Contexts. Ed.: Éva Antal, Csaba Czeglédi, Eszter Krakkó, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 189-201, 2019. ISBN: 1527538125

Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (3)

2. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** Against the Quotidian Trauma of "lived and un/imaginable lives": The Economics of Egg Donation and Motherhood in "Harvest" by Danielle Evans.
Studies in the American Short Story. 1 (1), 71-85, 2020. ISSN: 2688-1926.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5325/studamershstor.1.1.0071>
3. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** Surviving the Impossibility of Black Motherhood: Trauma and Healing in Sherley Anne Williams's Dessa Rose.
[sic]. 10 (1), 1-18, 2019. EISSN: 1847-7755.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15291/sic/1.10.lc.2>
4. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** The Subjectivity of Pregnancy and the Trauma of Abortion in Alice Walker's 'The Abortion'.
Watermark. 12, 121-130, 2018. ISSN: 1553-7641.

List of other publications

Foreign language international book chapters (1)

5. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** Mothers, Mentors, and Communities in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *Push*.
In: *Mothering, Community, and Friendship*. Ed.: Dannabang Kuwabong, Dorsía Smith, Essah Diaz, Demeter Press, Ontario, 1-19, 2022. ISBN: 9781772583748





Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (4)

6. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** "De itt vagyok": Női és anyai énteremtés Alice Walker BÍborszín és Sapphire Push című regényében.
Filol. Közlöny. 65 (2), 83-98, 2019. ISSN: 0015-1785.
7. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** Hol rasszizmus van, ott rasszizmus van: Recenzió Colson Whitehead A föld alatti vasút c. művéről.
Alföld. 69 (11), 130-134, 2018. ISSN: 0401-3174.
8. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** Sztereotípiák metszéspontjában: A fekete női test ábrázolásai a freak show-tól Beyoncé-ig.
Szkhólion. 16 (1-2), 90-99, 2018. ISSN: 1785-0479.
9. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** 'Erős ember kellett neki, nála erősebb!': Az apa befolyása a főszereplő életére Doris Lessing A fű dalol című regényében.
Szkhólion. 2 (1), 41-45, 2009. ISSN: 1785-0479.

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (5)

10. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** Affect for Mothers and Others.
Hung. J. Eng. Am. Stud. 25 (2), 449-451, 2019. ISSN: 1218-7364.
11. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** Coming of Age and Urban Landscapes in Edward P. Jones's "Spanish in the Morning" and "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons".
Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud. 25 (1), 51-65, 2019. ISSN: 1218-7364.
12. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** Fostering Innovation through Debating in the Classroom: Lessons from the Development of an E-learning Course for Secondary School Teachers in Hungary.
Werkstatt (Debr.). 14, 1-11, 2019. ISSN: 1585-3667.
13. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** 'A Twitter, a Coo, a Subdued Roar': Animal Symbolism in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man.
Eger J. Am. Stud. 13, 201-218, 2012. ISSN: 1786-2337.
14. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** Benang: Establishing, Maintaining and Subverting Power.
Topos. 1 (1), 115-122, 2012. ISSN: 2063-8086.

Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

15. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** Lynching and Flying: Animal Imagery in Ralph Ellison's Flying Home and Other Stories.
Colorado Critical Review. 2 (1), 1-20, 2018. ISSN: 2471-7592.

Hungarian conference proceedings (1)





**UNIVERSITY of
DEBRECEN**

**UNIVERSITY AND NATIONAL LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN**

H-4002 Egyetem tér 1, Debrecen
Phone: +3652/410-443, email: publikaciok@lib.unideb.hu

16. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** A vitamódszer alkalmazásának hatása a társadalmi innovációra: a vitázás elsajátításának és oktatásának összefüggései különböző kompetenciák és attitűdök fejlődésével.

In: Tavaszi Szél = Spring Wind 2019. Szerk.: Bihari Erika, Molnár Dániel, Szikszai-Németh Ketrin, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, Budapest, 633-641, 2020. ISBN: 9786155586606

Foreign language conference proceedings (1)

17. **Lénárt-Muszka, Z.:** Transgression, Shame, and Rebellion: The Politics of Breastfeeding in African American Literature.

In: VI. Interdiszciplináris Doktorandusz Konferencia 2017 : Tanulmánykötet. Szerk.: Ács K., Bódog F., Mechler M., Mészáros O., Pónusz R, Pécsi Tudományegyetem Doktorandusz Önkormányzat, Pécs, 351-360, 2017. ISBN: 9789634291114

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

04 June, 2021

