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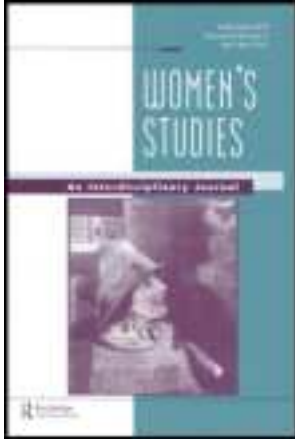
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The Buried Madonna: Matricide, Maternal Power and the Novels of Michèle Roberts

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**THE BURIED MADONNA: MATRICIDE,
MATERNAL POWER, AND THE NOVELS
OF MICHÈLE ROBERTS**

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In a century which has been notable for a continued failure to attribute subjectivity, agency or physical and emotional individuality to mothers (Kaplan; Walker; Hirsch; Petchesky; Roth), the work of the Anglo-French writer Michèle Roberts foregrounds an elusive, paradoxical maternal power which has a difficult but vital relationship with the embodied, individual mother. Such power is rarely articulated in Western public life, and has been variously theorized as *jouissance*, supplementary signification, pre-Oedipal merging, and other forms of untranslatable or primitive excess or “enjoyment” (Derrida; Lacan). Indeed, the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of maternal power, or “matriarchy” (conceived of as maternal dominance unmitigated by masculine control) in Western societies is a major contributor to the political demonization of, for example, single mothers and female-headed households. Through these powerful discourses, the very concept of maternal power, untempered by traditional male control, is rendered dangerous and deviant. It will be the argument of this article that Roberts’ writing points both to the persistent denigration of maternity within the symbolic systems we have available, and to ways in which it might be subverted and maternal power reconceptualized as a positive, generative force. In Roberts’ work, mothers frequently appear as dead, or as phantoms between life and death. They are buried, both in physical and linguistic, symbolic terms: encrypted. Roberts explores the fundamental taboo of matricide, an ultimate silencing of women and their bodily and emotional experience; but she also sketches the possibility of a generative

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structural loss connected with the mother, not (only) with the Dead Father of the Law (Mitchell *Psychoanalysis*). Thus, she consistently gestures toward a new economy of meaning, buried alive under current Symbolic constraints. The mother as both body and symbol is shown as foundational, yet she is never fully and unproblematically recognized or allowed expression. The focus of this article on “dead” or phantom mothers may appear contradictory: what can maternal “death” tell us about contemporary maternity, the living and writing of actual maternal lives? I will argue here that the figure of the “dead” mother is important for what it tells us about the positioning of maternal subjects within Western thought. The suppression, silencing, and disembodiment which leads to feminine social and political non-existence, or death, can be usefully compared with the linguistic and psychoanalytic mechanisms which consign the mother to a place of death—a meaningless black hole of excessive physicality and emotionality from which no man (sic) ever truly escapes. Roberts’ writing is significant for its frank and disturbing reflections on maternal anger, suffering and trauma, the feelings Western mothers are not supposed to feel, and for its attempts to express and subvert the “unrepresentable” maternal subject, her emotions and sexuality. It frequently deals with the traditional channeling of mothers into the ultimately sterile Virgin/Madonna synthesis in Western religious and representational cultures. In order to better unravel the complexes of maternal repression and power which Roberts explores, this article deploys a particular psychoanalytic theory of maternal repression and buried psychic life, as an interpretative aid to two of her novels, *Daughters of the House* and *Impossible Saints*: André Green’s concept of the “dead” psychic mother, which will be described in detail below. I will argue that since Roberts’ phantom mothers insistently reappear in registers which from time to time penetrate or “haunt” the normative, her novels challenge Green’s highly negative configuration of the psychic “dead” mother, and offer a possible way out of her crypt by reinstating her, and not only her child, as emotional and literary subject.

A “Maternal Body” of Work

Roberts’ early novels and poetry emerged within the consciousness-raising projects of second-wave British feminism. Her

valorization of the maternal may thus appear rooted in the exuberant countercultural optimism (and essentialism) of that time. However, Roberts attempts to write the imperfect feminine/maternal back into the body of literature:

. . . it's a sort of political urge I've got . . . [a] feminist urge. I want to put the body always into language. I was brought up in a tradition of reading and thinking at university that, in a sense, left the body out. It was all about your mind. That good writing didn't have a "self" in it, didn't have an ego in it. . . . I'd been a Catholic and the body is very scorned in Catholicism—particularly the female body—I wanted to rescue the body and cherish it and love it and touch it and smell it and make it into language. Make language actually a body, as it is to be human. (Richards n.p.)

Roberts' work has been classified as "women's" fiction, not quite mainstream, with the prize-winning *Daughters of the House* "somewhat patronisingly described as a breakthrough novel" (Luckhurst 243). *Daughters of the House* is a novel about two young girls growing up in a French village in the years after the Second World War. The girls become gradually and confusedly aware of dark secrets in the immediate past of the village, which they eventually connect to a fundamental repression of unpalatable "truths" about its history and inhabitants. Nonetheless, these hidden "truths" possess a trapped energy of their own, symbolized by the statue of a maternal goddess buried in the cellar of the house of the title. The buried Madonna represents a feminine, maternal form of ancient and presumably lost power. In *Impossible Saints*, a novel full of lost or silenced mothers, the most significant is Josephine, who becomes Mother Abbess of a Convent in an unnamed, timeless world where the Church still retains ultimate control. Living in fear of a brutal Inquisition, Josephine nonetheless makes secret plans to found a house of delights in which women may practice an alternative, sensual spirituality. Her untimely death brings an end to the plans, but also summons up a lively phantom. Full of "real" mothers and mother-figures, Roberts' writing also privileges the mother's body as the foremost metaphor of literary production, "a production linked to excess and sexuality which breaks the narrow confines of patriarchal meaning and sense" (Walker 138; Cixous). According to Roberts, language is "a kind of birth into absence": "my theory is that inspiration is born of loss. So that if there's an empty space inside you, something can come and

fill it. Something can get born inside you” (20).¹ Intense contradictions complicate the “maternalist” ethos underlying Roberts’ oeuvre. As a writer of the female body, Roberts aims to find “words which do not bar the corporeal, but can speak corporeal” (Irigaray “Bodily Encounter” 43); she must nonetheless work within the limitations of a linguistic order based on the Law of the (dead) Father who “forbids the bodily encounter with the mother” (39). The Symbolic Order places the body she aims to recover outside “rational” meaning.

Roberts attempts to create a literary middle ground and borderland combined: “a privileged site where a special kind of meaning is created and enacted, a meaning unattainable to enlightenment reason” (Schabert 87). This meeting-place of body and language(s) materializes in Roberts’ description in *Daughters of the House* of a young Anglo-French girl, Léonie, travelling over the English Channel:

Halfway across, as the Channel became *La Manche*, language reassembled itself, rose from the waves and became French. . . . Léonie fought to keep awake, to know the exact moment when, in the very centre of the Channel, precisely equidistant from both shores, the walls of water and of words met, embraced wetly and closely, became each other, composed of each other’s sounds. For at that moment true language was restored to her. Independent of separated words, as whole as water, it bore her along as a part of itself, a gold current that connected everything, a secret river running underground, the deep well, the source of life, a flood driving her, salty breaker on her own beach, streams of words and non-words, voices calling out which were staccato, echoing, which promised bliss. (35–6)

In this passage, Léonie imagines an edge or ending to “the code of abstract representations that separates words from things and the speaker from the subject it strives to master” (Sellers *Myth and Fairy Tale* 24), that of the *logos* or Word of the Father. Susan Sellers writes of the mythic narrative, or *mythos*, that it comprises “the playful possibilities of language to create a plurality of meanings that will exceed all rational binary orders, including the foundation

¹Roberts’ statements about her writing’s inspiration strongly recall Cixous: writing and birth represent “a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood” (Cixous 891).

of the *logos* itself" (ibid.).² It is in this sense that Roberts employs mythic and iconic structures and images in her work, including the configurations of the Oedipus complex, in writing which gestures toward a "gold current" of meaning which might subvert designification and reinscribe women's bodies into a refigured Symbolic order.

The optimism of re-embodiment is, however, frequently countered in Roberts' work by a focus on the death, mutilation and loss of women's bodies, particularly mothers. Green's theories are enlightening when examining this painful contradiction. Green argues that an incomprehensible maternal depression causes the child to experience the mother as already dead, and to maintain her "perpetually embalmed" within a psyche which has never experienced her living love and for that reason cannot let go of her *imago*, his term for her malefic psychic presence (Green 162; Doane and Hodges 54). Green's maternal imago is a result of the mother's subjective suffering. However, echoing the influential post-Second World War theories of Bowlby and the attachment school, Green's concept of the "death-bearing" mother (Kristeva *Black Sun* 28) deprives her of subjectivity. Her inscrutability and remoteness is a striking feature of his work, though he does speculate upon the possible causes of her depression:

. . . nobody knows *why* the mother is depressed. The baby doesn't know it, and it is not sure that the others know it; in fact, there can be any reasons . . . perhaps a miscarriage. . . . It can be the awareness of the mother that the father is cheating on her. It can be that she has lost her own father and mother. (Kohon 54)

Read in the context of Greens' important, yet rather austere and forbidding, psychoanalytic work, Roberts' "re-visions" (White 180, quoting Rich) of mothers' stories offer a feminist challenge to influential narratives of maternity in post-second world

²Sellers' argument about *mythos* and *logos* draws on the theories of Jacques Derrida, for whom (she writes) "the *logos* functions through a destructive dialectic of opposition, a strategy which is doomed to fail since the very process of demarcation and rejection means it is shaped by whatever it designates as its other and struggles to deny" (*Myth and Fairy Tale* 25). She emphasises the "radical potential" of the excess, or supplement, in the written text, "the system of differences whereby its meanings are produced [which] allows other possibilities to come to the fore"; an excessive, "feminine" text is an unguarded network that continually unfolds outwards towards others' (ibid.; see also Sellers *Language*).

war developmental psychology, which emphasized the standpoint of the child either traumatised or “contained” by the mother. In *Daughters of the House* maternal and matrilineal narratives and histories blend disturbingly with the repression of recent Second World War trauma. In *Impossible Saints* knowledge passed along feminine and particularly maternal lines is lost or violently suppressed by religious patriarchy. These blocks to matrilineal transmission recall what Green describes as a sort of blind spot in the psyche traumatized by the “death” of the mother, and in the culture at large which consigns her to absence (Jacobs 26). Maternal presence in both novels is paradoxical and often chaotic, full of unexpressed pain, unsolved mysteries, and frustrating narrative gaps. However, Roberts offers an important challenge to Green when she locates maternal presence beyond the intimate, empty role of her child’s lost object and connects the living mother, imperfect as she is, with rich mythic versions of her: on several occasions in her work, the rediscovery of an individual mother is echoed or complemented by maternal spiritual objects, such as a Red/Gold Lady (a sensual “re-vision” (Rich; White) of the Christian Virgin) who appears to Thérèse, one of the two “daughters” in *Daughters of the House*. Thus Roberts writes toward rehabilitation of the “dead mother” rather than her avoidance and negation.

Indeed, her mothers are often “not dead enough”: they refuse to die once and for all, coming back to haunt in the forms of nightmares and ghosts (*Daughters* 1; *Impossible Saints* 291). She references mythical eras or civilizations in which maternity may not have been marginalized: the Red/Gold Lady and the buried statue of a figure resembling the Greek mother-goddess, Demeter, in *Daughters of the House* are icons of *authoritative* maternity, dead or not; although the Lady is crucially misread as the obedient, sexless Virgin by representatives of the Catholic Church, and the statue is broken (*Daughters* 95, 161–2). *Impossible Saints* contains references to lost forms of knowledge pertaining to a forgotten civilization: these appear as books in an ancient language, found in a locked chest belonging to a dead mother. Poems transcribed in secret yellow scrolls (belonging to Beatrice, mother of the novel’s main character, Josephine) and annotated excitedly in her handwriting, are written in the language of the “ancients” (189). This maternal language is prohibited (the child Josephine was not

allowed to read these scrolls (45)), just as recovery of the mother's body or of the maternal "body" of language is culturally barred. Maternal figures in Roberts' work are frequently portrayed as mis-read, "distortions, blanks and alterations" in established narratives (Jacobs, 25).

Sublimation and alteration of the dead or "death-bearing" mother are perhaps factors in the closeted, desexualized ideals of feminine virtue embodied in the Virgin, the female saint, or the nun (central figures in *Daughters of the House and Impossible Saints*). Western cultures still enact the wish "to nourish the dead mother, to maintain her perpetually embalmed" (Green 162).³ Green says of the "stalled mourning" of one of his own patients for his dead wife: "In fact, he did not mourn her, because he would have become aware of how cruel he had been; paradoxically, he got rid of her through idealization" (Kohon, 53). The "solution" offered by the distorting idealization of mothers conjures up its own phantoms, encouraging disavowed "maternal anguish" (Kristeva *Powers* 12) to seep through the borderlands of the normative. In *Impossible Saints*, one particular sainted mother (Josephine, a subversive Mother Superior apparently imprisoned forever in the architecture of a church) rises from the dead to subvert the institutional entrapment and consumption of her body. Saint Josephine returns to haunt with a particularly rich irony: barred from biological motherhood because she has lived in a society which divorces spirituality and intellect from feminine embodiment, she is fêted in death as a Mother of the Church. Though her troubling legacy of religious and sensual subversion is nominally "got rid of through idealisation," its ghost is not: Josephine appears in undead form as a representative of the encrypted, frustrated mother-worship implicit in the idolization of the Christian Virgin, the woman "alone of all her sex" (Kristeva "Stabat Mater" 145) worthy to participate in a "bodily experience of God" (Roberts "Words" 1) through her immaculate conception of Christ.

In *Impossible Saints* and *Daughters of the House*, the mother's "dead" body represents an obstructed linguistic (as well as embodied) entity. The psychoanalyst Nicholas Rand ("New

³In this context, there is a sinister significance to the story of a dead mother recently beatified by the Vatican, St. Gianna Beretta Molla, who chose to die rather than risk the life of her unborn child during surgery for cancer (Cruz).

Perspectives" 104) notes that "[the] discovery of psychic crypts and corresponding forms of hiding in language provide avenues for deciphering the obstructions that prevent linguistic entities from being joined with their potential sources of signification." Encountering the obstructions of what Abraham and Torok term "cryptonymy" ("processes that inhibit the emergence of signification" (104)), Roberts dramatizes maternal encryption and unintelligibility, gesturing toward the revelation of buried trauma. Though *Daughters of the House* in particular has been analyzed as a novel about the traumas of the Second World War and the Nazi genocide of European Jews (Luckhurst), Roberts' novels can also be productively read as exploring the traumatic trajectories of the development of the gendered subject, focusing on the female child's loss of the maternal body and the subsequent acquisition of femininity. Her work thus forms broad, complex links between the personal, the psychoanalytic and the political-historical. In her representations of mother-daughter relationships, she explores the undertows of the Oedipus complex (according to which cultural and psychic structures are organized around the son's loss of the mother, following the paternal prohibition on possession of the mother's body, and the castration complex). In her work, the supposed incapacity of *maternal* authority to structure the adult psyche (as opposed to passively nurturing it) is thrown into question, as is the whole concept of parental loss or symbolic death as "our vital necessity" (Kristeva *Black Sun* 28), primary structural event of the psyche. The "feminist urge" within Roberts' writing (Richards n.p.) is in part manifest in its close attention to the cryptic linguistic constellations that arise in literary representation of women's sexual and emotional development.

Sensual Ecstasy and Symbolic Disruption

The "true language" briefly revealed to Léonie in the no-man's-land of the Channel represents a sort of female-identified, alternative Symbolic order, signification "independent of separated words," capable of conveying bodily/spiritual experiences outside gendered norms of representation (see further Finke). Roberts also invokes and subverts the forms and traditions of the "feminine"/feminised categories of genre fiction within which "women's writing" has historically been corralled. *Daughters of the House* and *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) employ the

generic conventions of the mystery story and historical romance. In *Daughters*, for example, Roberts hints at the narrative conventions of the psychological thriller, in which a disturbed, fragmented childhood, often concealing a terrible and traumatic secret, is presented in flashback form. *Daughters* also exploits the settings and moods of the horror novel, its motifs of dark cellars, haunted rooms and nightmares.⁴ The critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis has argued that subversions of the “low” or “body” genres such as horror and romance act as attempts to escape their conventional closure and resolutions (1). Roberts rehabilitates denigrated forms of literature deemed to be bodily/feminine, not rational/ valuable (Clover).

Roberts’ writing displays an acute awareness of the ironies of her quest to “make language a body,” as she textually negotiates the occlusion of feminine sexuality and maternity. Thus, for example, in *Impossible Saints* the impossibly fragrant, incorrupt body of the dead Josephine is gnawed at by the “faithful” when it is laid out for veneration:

They approached their lips to the hand, the feet.

It took the nuns several days to realise what was happening. Some of the kisses were greedier and less reverent than others. Some of the faithful were feasting on Josephine. Taking bites out of her. They scurried off with little chunks of her flesh concealed in their cheeks or under their tongues. . . . The fingernails of the left hand, the toenails of both feet, the eyebrows, the eyelashes, the end of the nose. Someone had torn open the habit and bitten off the nipples. Someone else had nibbled the earlobes. The mouth was badly bruised. (*Impossible Saints* 14)

The Cardinal of the region wants the saintly corpse as the centerpiece for “a splendid chapel” (15). To avoid this, Josephine’s body is smuggled out of the convent where she has lived and been displayed in death. Sister Maria, prioress of the convent, resists the Cardinal’s claim because “the body of our Mother belongs to us all” (*ibid.*). Josephine’s body is then hacked to pieces, the parts intended to be sent around the country. “Every church that asked

⁴In *Impossible Saints*, Roberts plays with a more sacrosanct form, the hagiography or *Life* of the saint: official narratives whose formal and moral constraints are mocked and subverted by the surreal and often horrific short stories of fictional saints which form the alternate chapters, and in the “real” life of St. Josephine which the novel purports to relate.

for one would get a piece of her. . . . Sister Maria made a list of the parts of the body and what to charge for them" (18).

Josephine's life history is one of fragmentations and concealments which resemble the messy fate of her corpse. She commits herself to a convent as a young girl (51). Dissatisfied with the life of the convent, "a junk cupboard full of surplus women" (102), she briefly experiences ecstatic visions of Christ, who appears to her as a father-lover, bathing her in light (77). With the death of her actual father, Josephine's vocation is lost. As the story continues, Josephine herself subverts and contravenes all the Christian codes of feminine perfection. She emerges from the convent to live in the house of the a cousin, Magdalena; the house is a sort of pleasuredome, a blend of refined brothel and social club, with a gorgeous garden in which Magdalena grows herbs and plants according to the forbidden knowledge of the pre-Christian ancients (155–6). While living with her, Josephine makes plans to found a secret Order: "houses for single women to live in . . . Each house would be a double house, looking two ways" (192), one half "the sensual convent, where God manifested in sensual joy" (194), the other providing quiet retreat and solitude for the soul. This will be the solidification of Josephine's dream of "another house," an ideal, maternal space.⁵ The metaphor of the house/home as recovered maternal body, locus of embodied and spiritual renewal, is an important one throughout Roberts' writing: the elusive, fantastical "red kitchen" of *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) is another incarnation of this bodily "sacred space" (it is worth noting that in Josephine's detailed plan for her "double house," "[t]he kitchen would be the chapel" (*Impossible Saints* 193)). As Rosie White notes, Roberts problematizes the fantasized coziness of this female house/home, noting the difficulty of its attainment. For the main character of *In the Red Kitchen*, Hattie, a twentieth-century single woman, homelessness has loomed close throughout life; Josephine's "double" house remains unrealized (Hughes-Hallett 1997).⁶

⁵Other versions of this space in the novel are the warm room in which the child Josephine read by the fire with her mother, Beatrice (44), and the bed, a "warm tent of red hangings" (50) in which she plays sexual games with Magdalena: these fulfilling feminine enclosures stand in contrast to the draughty "junk cupboard" of the convent.

⁶Roberts has linked her own house in France, her mother's country of origin, to the recovery of maternal embodiment and plenitude (Roberts 175). However, she also remarks

This “different house” (*Impossible Saints* 50), the “real,” “living” house (51), is only reachable in a dream state. As Lucy Hughes-Hallett comments, Josephine “is protected by her early death from seeing her scheme, so seductive but unrealistic, founder in an ugly confusion of competing ambitions as her body is hacked to pieces by her reverent relic-hunting devotees” (n.p.). The women who inhabit Josephine’s fantasy convent will, according to her, “be able to live two lives: a double life: it was that simple” (Roberts *Impossible Saints* 192). Wish-fulfilment is undermined by the contradictions of Josephine’s own variety of double lives: aesthete and ascetic, saint and heretic, nun and courtesan. As Magdalena points out, Josephine’s vision is probably limited to single women, as it has not taken account of certain practical considerations: “What about married women? . . . women with children? Are they included? Who would look after the children if the mothers kept going off?” (194). Josephine is “flustered” by this question. It is sharply ironic that her vision of the fantasy house of spiritual, intellectual and sensual feminine pleasure is stymied by the potential presence of the maternal body and its offspring. Reproduction is hard to assimilate in Josephine’s dream-embodiment of house as recovered maternal body. Throughout the novel, Josephine is never a straightforward feminist heroine. At forty, she is in transition from being a thoroughly conventional nun, writer of “sweet little books” (specifically the *Life* describing, in terms acceptable to the Christian Inspectors, her progress to piety (130)). By contrast, the “new story” emergent after her crisis of faith is “incoherent and disturbed, with a confused beginning, a messy middle, and no end in view” (131). The intrusion/eruption of the semiotic, that space identified by Kristeva with the feminine and maternal, emerges for Josephine both as a release of repressive normativity and a frightening loss of boundaries. Initially presenting itself as sublime visions of Christ, its other (bodily) sources and the ramifications of these become apparent to Josephine. She particularly fears the Oedipal implications of her ecstasy in Christ, since as a nun she is

that her writing is concerned with anxiety-provoking questions about women and “home”: “Does a woman belong in this world and is she allowed to have a house of her own? I realized only recently that all my novels feature homeless women, that novels are the paper houses I build, then inhabit” (171).

metaphorically his “bride” as well as his daughter: “this bread is my body. This wine is my blood. My father is my lover. Do you realise, I spent thirty years of my life being afraid of a figure of speech?” (291).

Kristeva’s “death-bearing” mother and Green’s “dead” one represent maternal trespass across Oedipal boundaries as a disaster for the living (child) subject. The work of mourning, with its functions of “introjection or incorporation,” fruitful or deadened psychic reactions to loss (Abraham and Torok; Rand “Introduction” 14)⁷, appears to require the sealing-off of the fluid realm of the semiotic/maternal sublime. The concept of a linguistic and psychic maternal “crypt,” in which unacknowledged feelings are blocked from conscious symbolic transmission, either by the mother herself or by other social and psychic factors (including direct or forcible repression), is a particularly helpful one here. Abraham and Torok note that “inexpressible or cryptic mourning” for a lost object (Rand “Post-Script” 104) creates “disturbances of the expressive functions of language” (105). Such disturbances are apparent in Roberts’ “maternal” texts, as the maternal subject and/or mother-writer struggles to find an adequate linguistic and subjective standpoint from which to write or speak. The maternal crypt can be imagined as a container of the affects of m/other(s) dismissed from representation and thus from existence in the timelines of signification. For Abraham and Torok, “cryptonymic analysis” can reveal the processes that “inhibit the emergence of signification” (Rand 105). Since the incompletely mourned object is inexpressible in language, it is difficult to imagine a complete, fruitful act of mourning for an encrypted m/other. A feminist form of “cryptonomic” literary analysis could attempt to tackle the “disarray” of language facing writers who wish to represent maternal subjectivity (*ibid.*). In Roberts’ work, there are persistent attempts to foreground

⁷Abraham and Torok discuss the lasting impact of early attempts to negotiate the loss of the loved maternal object, claiming that the infantile fantasy of incorporation of this object blocks the possibility of transforming her loss into symbol. Introjection, which Abraham and Torok suggest as the alternative to the sterile consumption of the object, is a “fructification” (Rand “Post-Script” 14) of object-loss, entailing acknowledgement and mourning of the loss so that it may become generative and productive. The incorporated object, which corresponds to the dead mother in Green’s analysis, is the “anti-metaphor,” the place of no representation or of “designification” (Rand 105).

this linguistic disarray: attempts which sometimes lead to reproductions of it, as the reader is mystified or left stranded by narrative gaps and puzzling imagery. However, Roberts seeks language “which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language attempts to do, but which can go along with it” (Irigaray “Bodily Encounter” 43, parentheses omitted). She foregrounds “intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past” (Kristeva “Women’s Time” 19). Though these experiences may remain troublingly opaque and mysterious, in Irigaray’s terms Roberts’ writing works at giving the mother “new life” and rights to pleasure, passion, and anger (43).

Roger Luckhurst uses Freud’s (1984) theorization of relationship to the lost object during the process of mourning to assert that *Daughters* presents the many acts of mourning which inspire and punctuate its narrative as interrupted, incomplete, and ultimately impossible. In the novel, the ghosts of a Jewish family, murdered by the Nazis under shadowy circumstances, haunt the house and the surrounding community, which has failed to label the grave with the victim’s names. Antoinette, mother of Thérèse, dies of cancer during the narrative and leaves behind her an unclear story of “terrible experiences during the war” (27). As Abraham and Torok suggest, when trauma is wordlessly transmitted across generations it becomes impossible to withdraw libido from lost objects which somehow (like Green’s dead mother) *remain* within the consciousness of the living (Luckhurst 249). Luckhurst notes the insistent presence of the unsymbolized Other erupting into the text; attempts to symbolize in the novel, such as the Jewish family’s grave, are always disrupted.⁸ Thus, in *Daughters* red swastikas are daubed on the grave of the Jewish family, demonstrating the community’s failure to allay psychic/cultural hauntings.⁹ Abraham’s theory that “the tombs of others” come back to haunt (“Notes” 288) argues for the cross-generational transmission of traumatic “knowledges” unknown to

⁸In Morrison’s *Beloved*, an incomplete epitaph signifies Beloved’s state of undeath (Morrison 5; Luckhurst 247–8).

⁹In Luckhurst’s analysis of incomplete mourning in *Beloved*, Beloved’s solid yet undead body represents the impossible Real forcing itself in to the Symbolic (requiring a communal ritual of expulsion, or exorcism) (248–9). In *Daughters*, although the phantoms do not take solid shape and register instead as muttered fragments and nightmares, they perform a comparable function.

the conscious mind. Green links the “dead” mother’s own “conflicts with the previous generation” to her depression (Kohon 55).

The “dead presence” (Kohon 56) of troubled, repressed mothers in Roberts’ fiction thus mirrors and illuminates the persistence of social traumas, the local and national failure to learn from history. However, the monstrous maternal presence envisioned by Green and Kristeva does not allow for refilling of spaces left unoccupied, for the rebirths of affect and inspiration which Roberts likens to the creative process, and Kristeva and Green to the domain of “life”: the “dead mother” or maternal Thing is a sticky immanence which does not allow any replacement. “The maternal object having been introjected, the depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self is what follows, instead of matricide” (Kristeva *Black Sun* 28).

Trauma and the Dead Mother in *Daughters*

The trauma sufferer is, according to Juliet Mitchell, stuck in an empty, inflexible place: she “has the static icon of the primal scene rather than the moving possibility of the oedipal triangle” (Mitchell “Trauma” 131). Mimetic identification, such as we encounter in hysteria, with the “lost” object/mother is “a million miles” from “being able to see from her perspective”; rather, it incorporates and consumes that subjective/perspective. For one patient of Mitchell’s, a blocked writer, “to see himself by writing would have meant seeing his mother instead of being his mother” (132). For this man, as for Green’s patients, the incorporated mother blocks creativity and stifles the life instinct. The stifling trauma transmitted in *Daughters* is in large part a crisis of maternal sexuality and guilt. Dark hints of the “terrible experiences during the war” (27) which (according to the housekeeper, Victorine) turned Antoinette’s red hair grey are scattered throughout the novel, associating buried trauma with the fearful allure of adult and maternal sexuality as perceived by the two girls, Léonie and Thérèse. Pieces of origin-stories are scattered throughout the narrative, broken up like the words of the letters from which the shocked Thérèse pieces together the story of her mother’s ordeal, never fully revealed to the reader: “Cellar. Hiding it. He found me. Dark. Held. Couldn’t escape” (132). The story fragments, along with pieces of evidence such as Antoinette’s red shoe found in the

cellar (56), partially reconstruct the tale. Antoinette was guarding village goods which had been buried in the cellar to keep them from Nazi appropriation; she went down into the cellar with a German soldier. A sexual and/or violent act followed; Antoinette may have been raped, or may have seduced the soldier in order to protect the items hidden in the cellar. The result of the encounter is also unclear: Antoinette may have become pregnant by the soldier, with Thérèse, or, perhaps, with twins. (In this last version of the lost story, Thérèse and Léonie would be secret sisters, half-German; this gothic/melodramatic origin-story competes with Léonie's favored version, in which her own mother, Antoinette's sister Madeleine, had had an affair with Antoinette's husband, Louis; which would make Léonie and Thérèse *half-sisters*.)

While the girls pick up on the multiple echoes of adult suffering and desire within the house, writing and speech fail to pass on traumatic narratives. In the pieces of story which get through to the girls, Antoinette's terror erupts into the Symbolic in confused shards, like the snatches of talk in which the secrets of the house pass:

Those scum of sales Boches.

Poor Mademoiselle Antoinette.

Then I found her outside the kitchen door, crying, she'd lost her shoes what with one thing and another and she was too ashamed to come back into the house.

For a long time she wouldn't tell us.

What could we have done?

What else could we have done?

Sssh. (71)

In Léonie's dream, the opening scene of *Daughters of the House*, the dead Antoinette rises from the cellar with "her red hand-bag . . . full of shreds of dead flesh" (1): a bag of sexual as well as murderous secrets. Her mouth in the dream, bleeding at the corners, is "stuffed full of torn-up letters and broken glass," signifying the bodily and emotional wounding of Antoinette, the incoherence and failure of the various circulating narratives of her life, and her own inability to tell her story. The shredding and fragmentation of the dream-images (and later the shattering of the house's Quimper dish, and of the female statue which stood at the shrine) also recall the "broken-up body" of the

hysteric, protesting against and enacting the sociocultural incoherence of her embodied self and the traumatic experiences that have evacuated her: “breaking in bits, fragmenting as a body . . . is a desperately insistent presence” (Mitchell 2000, 227). The fragmentation in/of the text also speaks to the lasting, undead presence of the object of melancholic denial: “Better fragmented, torn, cut up, swallowed, digested . . . than lost” (Kristeva *Black Sun*, 12, quoted in Luckhurst, 256).

Maternal Undeath and the Mother/Goddess

The undead body of Antoinette denotes unspeakable “maternal anguish” troubling the boundaries of personality, family and community. This encrypted mother also encodes other unspeakable histories, specifically those of the betrayed Jewish family, whose access to speech in the novel is limited to the “gibberish” spoken by Léonie in her nightmares (133). The encrypted mother is also connected with an archaic history of lost and/or prohibited maternal sexuality and power, symbolized by Léonie’s Red/Gold Lady. Significantly, it emerges from the story-fragments that during the war, at the time of Antoinette’s traumatic experience, the cellar contained not only the village’s secret supply of alcohol but the statue of an ancient female saint, which had stood at the shrine before its removal by the Curé. Antoinette had saved the statue from complete destruction, but had also committed it to obscurity by burying it under a heap of sand. With the burial of the statue in the cellar, further echoes of the “dead” mother, incorporated but inaccessible, come to reverberate through the house. “The trampled statue had remained in the airless dark. . . . Shut up like a cry in a box” (162). Léonie’s Red/Gold Lady, reworked by Thérèse into a vision of the Virgin Mary in sombre blue, signifies the “conversion” of remnants of pre-Christian worship of female reproductivity and sexuality into the cult of the eternally chaste Mother of God. The Red/Gold Lady’s pagan, pre-Christian resonances represent a particularly important area of repression of feminine and maternal bodily power:

The female body, so feared and repressed, returns to haunt and dazzle us in the shapes of visionaries and visions—the Virgin Mary, apparently increasingly making herself visible all over the world in our own day, seems

to represent, to those who see her or are moved by reports of her presence, Godness itself. God is presented as female form. (Roberts 1997b, 1)

At the end of the novel, Thérèse unearths the statue of the ancient mother-saint, and then sets fire to another statue, of the Virgin in the church. This occurs after she has dreamed of her mother's dead body being "made whole again" (160), and decoded a broken message from her dying mother, a verbal transmission of trauma: "in the cellar, don't let him see, don't let him see me, mustn't catch, safe now?" (73). As the violence done to Antoinette in the cellar links her with the statue smashed by the priest, so the effigy is resonant of Antoinette when it is unearthed from the cellar by her daughter. The dead/occluded mother emerges from the ground, as Antoinette does in Léonie's nightmare. The statue's "very young face and long curly hair" (41) connects it to Léonie's Red/Gold Lady, an emanation of benevolent, sensual Otherness from an extra-Symbolic dimension. The effigy's resonances therefore include and surpass the lost mother Antoinette, encoding in its pagan symbolism other lost mother-bodies of language, spirituality, or knowledge; it carries in its hand a sheaf of corn, reminiscent of the ancient Greek goddess of plenty, Demeter.

"What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (Abraham "Notes" 287). The girls are exposed to the secrets of the house and of Antoinette, the village and the nation/world beyond, in barely comprehensible extra-Symbolic communications, such as the nightmares. The trauma experienced by the girls is, in Green's term, "blank," carrying with it the stasis and wordlessness which characterize his "dead mother complex." Green remarks that the anxiety related to all forms of object-loss differs from the acute fears of violence and wounding associated with the Freudian castration complex; it "bears the colours of mourning: black or white. Black as in severe depression, or blank as in states of emptiness" (Green 146). As already noted, "white," or blank, mourning is associated with the inability or refusal to learn from loss and grief. Léonie's reaction to white is violent: "everything she hated was white" (51). By contrast, Thérèse loves the color's purity and apparent simplicity; and her Virgin vision is indeed a "whitewash" of Léonie's Red/Gold lady. For Roberts, conventional religious and feminine purity encourage the malevolent idealization and "whitewashing" which,

according to Green (146), prevents proper mourning for the real, imperfect object.

A Bodily Experience of God

Roberts is aware of the curious embodiedness of religious iconography:

There is clearly a tremendous hunger among people to have bodily experiences of God: why else do miraculous statues bleed and weep? Here are those physical processes shunned by the Churches—menstruation, lactation—newly made numinous and holy. . . . God is worshipped through images of the physical. (“Words” 1)

The Lady is Léonie’s own “bodily experience of God,” the red/gold colors suggesting both heavenly sublimity and female physicality, the red blood of the womb (she appears at the time when both Thérèse and Léonie have their first period). Luckhurst (255) argues that the “streak of red” running through the text is a signifier of the unnamed erotic in the novel; but the red is clearly also the blood of the fertile female body, with all its repressed, abject connotations of adult female sexuality and reproductivity.¹⁰ In Léonie’s dream, Antoinette rises from the cellar with her red handbag to hang out two red petticoats (1); the two petticoats may represent the girls themselves, the mysterious sexual secret and potential shame of their conception(s), and/or of their own emergent sexuality. Red is also the color of sin: Thérèse sees a “red devil” (90) behind the curtains while ill with grief for her dead mother, and the Curé, who comes to interrogate her about her visions, is scandalized at the very thought of red in connection with the Virgin: “Red, I ask you!” (114). The ecstasy Léonie feels in the Lady’s presence has, as Luckhurst notes, a marked sexual element consonant with the passionate associations of the color. Jacques Lacan emphasized the specifically sexual intensity of mystical religious enjoyment in his famous comment about Bernini’s statue of

¹⁰Menstruation, seen as that pole of the cycle where the woman is for the time being infertile yet remains desirous/emotional/sexual, has been theorized as one of the most threatening aspects of female reproductive embodiment under patriarchal conditions. On the symbolic erasure of menstruation and the menstrual female body in literature and culture, see further Kerkham (2003).

St. Theresa: “you have only to look at her to see that she’s coming, there’s no doubt about it—but where is her ecstasy coming *from*?” (Lacan 147).¹¹ In Léonie’s case, her ecstasy, or *jouissance*, is unmistakably bodily as well as spiritual, although, like St. Theresa’s, it extends *beyond* physical sensation:

Something outside her, mysterious and huge, put out a kindly exploring hand and touched her. Something was restored to her which she had lost and believed she would never find again. The deepest pleasure she had ever known possessed her. (86)

The Lady’s other color, gold, signifies an all-encompassing, spiritual and physical female ecstasy in *Impossible Saints*, as when Josephine’s niece Isabel experiences a vision of a “golden mother” (289). The ecstasy the Red/Gold Lady inspires in Léonie is linked not only with pagan spirituality or mother-goddess worship, but with the various forms of embodied otherness: she is, as Victorine scornfully puts it, “coloured” (“that certainly cuts out the Blessed Virgin!” (1993, 89)), with “dark gold” skin and black hair (88). Completely beyond language (“it wasn’t about talking,” says Léonie (96)), she is an emanation of the benevolent M/other, the “originary goddess” (Sellers 21 and 16–22). It is thus that she is interpreted as abject by anyone other than Léonie, and can only be publicly accepted in Thérèse’s sanitized, Virginal disguise. Community, culture and church disavow the Red/Gold Lady and her myriad disturbing implications “through idealization” (Kohon 53).

Both Léonie, and Thérèse partake through their visions of the paradoxical empowerment of the feminine mystic, in which *jouissance* and its expression as religious ecstasy may work to reconstruct the “docile female bod[y]” of the devout woman (Finke 27, 75–107). While Léonie experiences this power as bodily ecstasy which she cannot communicate to the community around her, Thérèse, gains status when the Bishop visits the family and promises to grant her an official shrine (140). The suppression, in

¹¹The questions raised by Luce Irigaray in response to Lacan’s airy objectification of sublime female experiences of embodiment are very relevant here: “In Rome? So far away? To look? At a statue? Of a saint? Sculptured by a man? What pleasure are we talking about? Whose pleasure? For where the pleasure of the Theresa in question is concerned, her own writings are perhaps more telling” (91).

Thérèse's version of the vision, of the sensuality and sexuality of an explicitly female bodily experience of the sublime also reflects the longstanding cultural suppression of *maternal* sexuality (a similar repression occurs through the publication of Josephine's official saintly *Life*, in *Impossible Saints*, as I discuss below). In the light of cultural norms which inscribe the mother wholly in terms of infantile desires and fantasies of dyadic merging, it is dangerous to conceive of the mother as a sexual subject (see Jacobs 19). It is significant in this context that Thérèse, having dreamed of the figurative restoration of her dead mother's body (160), acknowledges Antoinette's sexuality and its link to her maternity:

The Virgin Mother of God . . . was the perfect mother who'd never had sex. To whom all earthly mothers had to aspire. . . .

Antoinette had often prayed to the Mother of God. She'd aspired to her. But she hadn't been perfect. She'd had sex. She'd had a baby. (165)

The Bone Chapel and the Incorporation of Femininity

The failure of verbal representation associated with the body of the feminized/racialized Other in *Daughters* echoes that of female bodies to signify within the Symbolic order in *Impossible Saints*. The novels share an image of a heap of bones. In *Daughters*, Léonie's friend and suitor Baptiste reveals that the condemned Jews and his own father, Henri, were kept in her bedroom the night before their execution by the Nazis. The bones of his father and the Jews were mixed together in a shared grave, under "a plain headstone, with my father's names and dates" (137). Léonie senses the incapacity of Baptiste's words to encompass the events they describe: the injustice to the unnamed Jewish victims, the social and cultural failure of mourning. "A pile of leftover words. Scraps of words, old bones of words. . . . That's what a grave was: a dump for torn flesh, broken bones. The Jews were back in the ground again. Mixed up more than ever before" (137). In *Impossible Saints*, Josephine's bones are subsumed amid a multitude of other saintly skeletons, which together form the Golden Chapel. During its building, a vast heap of bones are sorted and (mis)attributed to various female saints. Each saint is allotted a story that is, like Baptiste's story about the Jews, somehow mistold, ill-fitting. In both novels, the failure of symbolic commemoration

replicates the failure of the Symbolic Order to allow Jewish and female bodies to attain meaning. Thus the acts of mourning represented by both the “plain” headstone and the chapel are, to use Luckhurst’s term, impossible.

The “saints” of *Impossible Saints*’ alternate chapters die, usually exhausted or imprisoned, after living out a parable of the paradoxes and restrictions of feminine embodiment. Saint Barbara, for example, is a closeted daughter executed for invoking the “holy ghost of the mother” to combat imprisonment by her father, and is beheaded for her crime; and though her father is killed by a (presumably maternal) “thunderbolt,” there is no earthly salvation for Barbara. “The vultures came, and picked her bones white and clean” (283). These stories provide a subversive counter-narrative to the official *Lives* of the saints named and commemorated in the Golden Chapel. The stories, inscribed across the bone friezes of the chapel (and, we may speculate, probably as different from the alternative lives which appear in *Impossible Saints* as is Josephine’s actual life from her official *Life*) are empty, like the gold effigies which contain the bones: “shake her like a pepper pot and she’d rattle out her tale, some bone dust” (2). The falsity of the gilded cupboards which represent and apparently contain the saints is further emphasized at the novel’s end, which reveals the misattributions of the mass of bones from which the chapel is built by “the Little Sister Keepers of the Bones” according to “divine” guidance. “Faced with mixed bones from eleven thousand virgins plus one, all embracing each other intimately and promiscuously in glorious confusion, they put them confidently into neat piles” (307). The “saints” have been attributed false bodies as well as false “*Lives*,” completely undermining the normative narratives of Christian femininity which the chapel officially celebrates.

Re-Membering and Reparenting: The Reparation of the Dead Mother

Dismembered and reassembled, consumed and lost, Josephine’s dead body frames and underlies *Impossible Saints*. The Golden Chapel is a Gothic memorial to “dead” mothers. The description of the Chapel both echoes and contrasts with another “golden” moment in the book, Isabel’s vision of a post-Oedipal trinity with

a daughter at its center: “the woman was my golden mother. I had damaged her beyond repair I thought, but it was not so, for she returned to me, she spoke to me with love and called my name, she wanted me so much to be born in the golden cathedral that was her house” (289). The Golden Chapel is in fact a black joke of Josephine’s from beyond the grave: two “miracles,” apparently performed by her after her death, lead to its building, and establish her as an official saint canonized by the patriarchal Church. The chapel itself can be read as an image of the “deadness” encircling women and the maternal function in patriarchal culture, but it also embodies the endurance and troubling duplicity of conventional femininity: its institutionalized masquerade of virtuous docility, and its eruptions into an unstable Symbolic as sublimity or ecstasy (symbolized by the Chapel’s unearthly, disturbing beauty). Josephine herself is subsumed into the chapel structure in a final, grim joke:

Quite where Josephine’s bones ended up in the clutter, to be honest, was anybody’s guess. Probably she faded into the background, the abstract design of saintly lady subalterns and privates. The Cardinal, switching his focus to the glorious Saint Ursula, to whom the Golden House was now dedicated, agreed with Sister Maria that Josephine’s modest vanishing was typical of her unobtrusive sort of sanctity. (308)

In life Josephine deliberately “vanished” in order to conceal her dream of sensual sainthood, her imaginary “church” preaching spiritual recovery of the female and maternal body, from the real, patriarchal Church which threatened her heresies with torture and execution. Her act of subversion ironically ensures her burial within normative narratives of Christian and Western femininity (since she will be canonized as a minor saint), but also renders the chapel itself, “that disorderly house of dead women” (1), a lasting joke on the Church. Josephine’s bones and the chapel are a monument to a denied matricide, the sublimation of female embodiment and maternal mythology into Christian artifact—a denial also exemplified by Thérèse’s (mis)reading of the sensual Red/Gold Lady as the sexless Blessed Virgin, in *Daughters*. Josephine returns after death to her niece Isabel, laughing “fit to burst” at the very concept of metaphor (291), since her life, its restrictions and secrets, the falsities made of it by her official

Life and by her “faithful,” is itself a troubling metaphor for the situation of women in patriarchal societies.

As suggested by her post-mortem laughter, Josephine’s “crypt” is a lively and incomplete one. The mosaic of bones in which she is “lost” is not her full story: “[p]arts of Josephine ended up here . . . and parts of her did not” (3). As bone-fragment and relic, she is dead to patriarchy, yet Roberts suggests a means of “re-mem-bering” her: Isabel, her niece, senses Josephine’s presence in the “wetness and warmth” of a garden, as she writes down memories of her.

I invent her. I reassemble her from jigsaw bits and pieces of writing; from scattered parts. I make her up. She rises anew in my words, in my story. Mended; put back together and restored; between my hands. (290)

Isabel’s “re-mem-bering” Josephine recalls her dismemberment by those who wished to have a piece of her, to possess the body of “our Mother” and incorporate it. It is also a linguistic fragmentation: “they dismembered her. Jo.se.phine” (4). Isabel’s memoir mourns Josephine by committing a sensual version of her to memory and paper. In the medicinal herb garden which Josephine had loved (and in which the hidden knowledge of the “ancients” grows on), she is re-embodied, re-mem-bered, so as to be laid to rest. The scene is closely comparable to Thérèse’s dream in *Daughters* of the reconstruction of her mother, immediately before she unearths the buried statue:

They were preparing [Antoinette] for burial. They stitched up the torn skin, moulded the features of the face back into position, set the broken bones, then coaxed the limbs to lie straight. The body having been made whole again, they washed and dried it, then wrapped it in a linen sheet. Léonie had been a shadowy figure in the corner, watching in silence. Now she came forward. She made a fist, let sand trickle from it on to the white shroud. She made a pattern. She wrote something, a line of sand. Thérèse craned forward to read it. (160)

This dream-ritual of mourning lays to rest the undead maternal phantom which had appeared in Léonie’s nightmare. Difficulties and losses, however, persist. The words written in sand are snatched away at awakening; the female collectivity envisioned in Thérèse’s dream of maternal reparation will not be repeated in

daily life. As the novel ends, it is uncertain whether Thérèse has survived the blaze which she has started in the church, setting fire to the statue of the Virgin in an attempt to create “a funeral” for the false, sexless Holy Mother (166).

Roberts’ work contests the historical denigration of feminine intellectual, emotional and religious life as “negative” to the healthy, rational and positive masculine. Freud’s work on negation (1961, 236) suggested that it “is on the one hand defensive but also, on the other hand, important in freeing thinking from repression. . . . the second part tends to get forgotten” (Parsons 1999, 60). In Robert’s work, “[a] free-floating imagination and the ability to use metaphor to transfer meaning from one domain to another facilitate the recontextualization of memory. This process, which Freud termed *Nachträglichkeit*, may enable the individual to transcend a traumatic past” (Modell 85). Thus, in *Impossible Saints*, Isabel’s re-memory of Josephine in the garden follows on from her blissful vision of the “golden mother.” Previously, Isabel has described nightmares of her own long-dead mother, killed by fever when she was six. This mother remained undead for her child: “she sleep-walked looking for my father and she should not have done, she should have lain quiet like a good girl. . . . At night she opened her eyes and stared at me and accused me of wanting her dead” (273–4). This unquiet phantom represents infantile anxieties about rage against, and desire to possess, the mother whose boundaries are entangled with those of the emergent self, the fear of losing her through one’s own fault and forbidden desires for the father. It was temporarily placated by the reparative relationship with Josephine, aunt and surrogate mother. “Her body became the reality. . . . Just as I had learned to trust her, that love was more or less reliable, she too started dying” (274). Isabel’s re-remembering of Josephine includes the reparation and letting-go of her own maternal *imago*. The re-remembering of Josephine echoes Josephine’s own reparenting of Isabel, and the unconventional “maternal” bond forged between aunt and niece, in a story which models “critical dissent from dominant narrative[s]” (Blau DuPlessis 5) about maternity.

According to Amber Jacobs’ argument about the general cultural and psychic exclusion of structural, generative matricide, refigured modes of mourning like the ritual in which Thérèse dreams of mending her dead mother or Isabel’s laying to rest of

undead maternal bodies might “give symbolic structuring power to the mother . . . dislodge the paternal monopoly on symbolic functioning” (23). Jacobs urges an understanding of “matricidal” fantasy that proposes a dynamic, heterogeneous Symbolic with potential for reorganization and transformation. The mother’s body could be relocated as an alternative starting-point for psychic and linguistic (self-) organization. Roberts strikes several notes of caution against such radical hopes: for instance, the Christian patriarchy which refuses to introject Josephine/Mother’s body, and insists on incorporating a false version of her, manages to entomb her “true” *Life* and subsume it in a false one. The true *Life* is first fragmented and then lost, unavailable even to Isabel. It is also, as already noted, the fate of the entombed female saints of the golden house to remain vessels for stories which are not their own.

In *Daughters*’ final scene, Léonie enters a room full of ghosts, with the idea that “Thérèse was waiting for her on the other side of the door” along with others long dead (the murdered Jewish family, their doomed protector Henri, and her own father, Maurice). The “darkness” into which she steps, “to find words” (172) may bring with it violent extinction and/or sublime transcendence. A certain state of grace, a sensual bliss of sisterly fusion and maternal plenitude, has previously been encapsulated in Léonie’s night-time vision of shared breastfeeding by a wetnurse, Rose Taillé:

Her edges were of warm flesh, arms that held, contained. . . . Sweetness was her and it, her two hands grasping, her mouth demanding and receiving the lively flow. She was in a good place. Where the arms that held her would not let her drop . . . where her name was called over and over . . . Rose sat easily, a baby on each arm. She looked from Léonie to Thérèse and she smiled. Of course I fed you both, silly. I had plenty of milk didn’t I. . . . Rose in her chair by the fire, blouse undone, a lapful of babies, a shout of joy, the smell of milk, there, my dears, there. (168–9)

The reader of *Daughters* cannot finally know whether Thérèse and Léonie achieve the blissful shared identification, “independent of separated words,” promised by this vision. The mother/goddess who unites them at the breast cannot be reclaimed entirely and forever, although the vision of Rose promises divine protection for the girls: “I took you both to the shrine in the woods, Rose said . . .

It's what we always did with babies in the village. In the old days. I wanted you both to live, not die like my child did" (169). The broken statue of the ancient saint which Thérèse leaves in the cellar, and the shattering of Antoinette's Quimper dish (94) remain unresolved and disturbing images of destruction and destructive (non-creative) matricide. Léonie later finds a piece of the dish which she had chosen and saved as a girl, an image of female hands clasped around flowers, reminiscent of the statue's handful of corn (150). Some losses are irrecoverable and leave only fragments, relics; there can be no introjection and "fructification" (Rand "Introduction" 14) of these.

Roberts' two sinister houses, the golden chapel/house of *Impossible Saints* and the "changeable house" (1) in *Daughters*, are both founded on forms of creative, generative matricide which remain eternally and necessarily incomplete. The "vital necessity" to kill, dismember, dispose of the dead mother is a task, like mourning, forever beyond completion here; the mother must be continually re-membered and restored. Roberts' presentations of the dismembered and remade maternal dead suggest a creative impossibility at the heart of the work of mourning: the necessity to let go in order to remember, which is at the heart of Freud's prescription for healthy, complete mourning. The mother's dead body is never completely lost or let go of in Roberts' novels: it lingers on, foundational, yet never fully and unproblematically recognized or expressed. Roberts' work elaborates the workings of "a structural loss that is not reducible to the logic of patricide" (Jacobs 22). It suggests ways (none of which are clear or complete within Symbolic constraints) to conceive and express a different economy of meaning, within which creative matricide and its necessity are acknowledged: an acceptance of the structural power of the Dead Mother, as well as the Dead Father, of the Law. Matricide conceptualized as a structural psychic event (and not merely as a foundational necessity for the entry of phallic meaning) provokes different "modes of mourning, of remembering, of symbolizing" (Jacobs 23), of which Isabel's active "re-memory" (to use the word coined by Morrison in *Beloved*) of Josephine in *Impossible Saints* is an example.

The double bind of matricide under current cultural and symbolic conditions makes "killing" the internalized mother necessary to maintain psychic balance, condemns maternal stories

to obsolescence (and/or to wordless, traumatic transmission), and thus colludes in the historical occlusion of women.¹² A possible solution, suggested by Roberts' fiction, and reflective of the psychotherapeutic strategies of Jessica Benjamin (1988, 1995), is to actively imagine and inhabit the subjective place of the mother. Kristeva in *Stabat Mater* suggests that this may occur on the bodily level at which the woman giving birth re-experiences the life of her own mother. Unlike Green's maternal *imago*, Roberts' includes all that is troubling about mother as *living* subject—her sexuality, physicality, fragility, depression, and ambivalence. Thus, it becomes possible to comprehend or decode intergenerational transmissions without being sucked into the depths of horror and self-fragmentation. We might even understand the mother as a maker of laws, as well as object or target of them. Roberts' recovery of the maternal body in words is not a transmutation/slaying of a monstrous Thing, an exorcism of the dead mother in Green's terms; but neither is it a wallowing in melancholic stasis. Her work suggests that the maternal body's association with death must be recognized in context, as a result of history, the writings-out which transmute woman/mother into emptiness.

The ritual re-embodiment of the dead mother is a paradigm for other kinds of spiritual/corporeal restoration. Though Roberts' maternal religiosity never finds true fulfillment in her work, and the rituals which inscribe it are not fully comprehensible, she outlines a utopian feminist/feminine space for the healing of the physical and psychic wounds of the feminine/feminized trauma victim. The revelation and healing of abuse is paradigmatic of feminism's twentieth century encounters with the politics of personal trauma (Herman; Caruth "Unclaimed Experience" and *Trauma*; Robson "Women's Time"). Personal/political healing takes place within a mythical "monumental time" which Kristeva ascribes to the feminine (14). Roberts gestures toward an alternate Symbolic order, "just yonder," in the dream sequence: the lost writing in sand on Antoinette's restored body might perhaps be the speech of Kristeva's elusive "third generation" of feminism, "less a chronology than a *signifying space*, a both corporeal and desiring mental space" ("Women's Time" 33, emphasis in original)

¹²In Kristeva's formulation this double-bind traps women in particular, since they are likely to identify more fully with the mother: *Black Sun* 28–30.

in which the Symbolic itself will be rewritten and women will no longer be forced into silence (see White 189–190). As Josephine prophesies, the location of women in the realms of mimicry, duplicity and masquerade to which the current Symbolic order confines them is never fixed: “[i]n time . . . the existence of the other side of the house will be able to be revealed. The double house will not need to be kept a secret forever” (196). Roberts’ writing suggests that daughters of the Symbolic cannot step freely into the crypt of the dead mother, but must come to terms with her in a space which is exciting and dangerous to access. Alive to the possibilities of feminist utopia, she is also merciless in her portrayal of the internal and external blocks to its realization.

Derrida’s concept of supplementary signification, the narrative and textual excesses and contradictions which, he maintains, are an inevitable presence in all texts (Sellers 25), is consciously grasped and manipulated by those who, like Roberts, attempt to write the maternal body. Roberts’ maternal writing follows “a strategy without finality” (Derrida 7); there cannot be any mastery of this subversive textual body. Like a traumatic memory, it is only approached and reconstructed through bodily sensation, ritual and poetic sensibility. Complete decryption within the current sociocultural Symbolic may not be possible, but Roberts expresses a conviction that “to bear witness to this impossibility remains possible” (Luckhurst 258, quoting Lyotard 93). The fact that maternal subjectivity still struggles to attain written and spoken articulation in Roberts’ novels reflects the cultural persistence of maternal “deadness.” She suggests that maternal “death” can only be combated by a slow, complex, always compromised process of re-incorporation, involving the acknowledgment and (partial, repeated) undoing of encryption.

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