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Fearsome Worlds and Uncanny Children: Gothic Early Childhoods in Condé's *La Migration des coeurs* and Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*

SUZANNE MANIZZA ROSZAK

Abstract

*Gothic depictions of early childhood and its antecedents from conception to childbirth stand to fundamentally shape readers' understanding of colonialism across the transnational and translinguistic space of the Caribbean. This effect is particularly visible in contemporary novels such as Maryse Condé's *La Migration des coeurs* (1995) and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), which not only have been interpreted as rewritings of *Wuthering Heights* but also draw on a larger, more multicultural Gothic literary tradition. In their renderings of sexual violence, doomed pregnancies, and motherless infancy, Condé and Kincaid appropriate and edit Gothic conventions, highlighting persisting ramifications of the colonial project for women and children. Gothic youth also functions as a subversive site of resistance with the potential to dismantle imperialist ideologies and systems.*

In postcolonial Caribbean fiction from diverse national and linguistic contexts, Gothic texts have proven essential to the work of retelling histories, calling out persisting injustices and mythologies, and mobilizing for the radical, transnational change necessitated by what Jennie Suk rightly terms the “continuing neo-colonial global inequality” (2) of our contemporary moment.¹ A robust community of scholars has documented the politically important gothicism of texts by writers ranging from V.S. Naipaul and Jamaica Kincaid through Marie-Vieuch Chauvet and Maryse Condé to Rosario Ferré and Pedro Cabiya (see Ankhi Mukherjee, Shockley,

¹ The spaces subject to this neo-imperialist condition include a range of still-colonized territories that are sometimes forgotten when the term “postcolonial” is treated as synonymous with “post-independence” rather than as referring to “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft et al. 2).

Oloff, Paravisini-Gebert, and Braham). Fundamental to this conversation is the understanding that the Gothic genre, rather than having simply originated in Europe and having then been appropriated by a string of writers from colonized and formerly colonized places, has a much more complex and transnational constellation of origins. For Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno and Inés Ordiz, “a global perspective on literary history” (3) requires us to recognize what Glennis Byron describes in theorizing the transnational Gothic: that “responses to modernity similar to what the West has named Gothic have emerged elsewhere, even if differently modulated by other historical and cultural conditions” (370). Elsewhere in the Americas, for instance, the history of the Gothic encompasses an Indigenous Gothic tradition that both predates and postdates the most seminal European exemplars of the genre (see Burnham). It also includes an African American Gothic tradition with its own urgent formal and thematic preoccupations shaped by the racialized horrors of antebellum and postbellum American life and by the cultural inheritances of the African diaspora (see Wester and Edwards). Caribbean Gothic texts tend to function similarly in that they reflect a multicultural, richly multivalent gothicism that has much in common with these alternatives to the European Gothic. Meanwhile, when we do read postcolonial Caribbean Gothic texts as engaging more directly with European currents of literary and cultural production, it is easy to see how these “responses to modernity” have generated fierce and inventive critiques of the metropole. As Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert notes, more than a century’s worth of Caribbean writers have “entered into a complex interplay with [their] English and continental counterparts . . . whose foremost concern has finally become the very nature of colonialism itself,” weaponizing quintessentially European features of the genre against those whom some once uniformly credited with originating it (233).

A recurring, shared feature of many of these texts—especially when they are authored by women—is the emphasis that they place on early childhood and the events that precede it, from conception and pregnancy to labor and birth. This transnational feature of the postcolonial Caribbean Gothic comes particularly into focus when we read novels such as Condé’s *La Migration des coeurs* (translated into English as *Windward Heights*) and Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* alongside one another. As contemporary African diasporic women writers, Condé and Kincaid have both been undeterred in creating complexly intersectional, boundary-crossing works of literary art that grapple with the colliding legacies of European colonialism; American neo-imperialist incursions in the Caribbean; Western structures of patriarchy, misogyny, and violence; and other mutually constitutive conditions that have shaped the lives of women and children from Antigua and Guadeloupe to Cuba, Dominica, and beyond. In 1995 and 1996, first Condé and then Kincaid published novels that, to varying degrees, functioned as re-envisionings of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*: a narrative that itself embraces what George E. Haggerty calls “the gloomy abysses of the Gothic novel” (73). Condé’s *La Migration des coeurs* at some points mirrors Brontë’s novel so closely that one reviewer referred to the parallels between the two texts as “excessive” (de Diego). Kincaid’s narrative has

² Gothic representations of conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and early childhood have not been discussed in detail in readings of either book; the important but incomplete convention of “tragic motherlessness” (Davison, “African-American Gothic” 277) has tended to receive more exclusive attention in these conversations. Paravisini-Gebert’s reading of *The Autobiography of My Mother* and Davison’s reading of *La Migration des coeurs* are exceptions in at least incidentally addressing these tropes. Comparative studies of Kincaid’s and Condé’s gothicism are virtually nonexistent.

a much subtler relationship to its British precursor, although Paravisini-Gebert has convincingly suggested that Kincaid’s protagonist Xuela ought to be understood as Kincaid’s “female version of a Caribbean Heathcliff,” reflecting the place of *Wuthering Heights* as “a seminal text in her own formation as a writer” (250). What is resoundingly shared across the two contemporary novels is a Gothic vision of early childhood and its antecedents that stands to fundamentally shape readers’ understanding of colonialism and its after-echoes across the transnational and translanguistic space of the Caribbean—all this articulated through a variegated Gothic aesthetic that invokes both European and distinctively non-Western permutations of the genre in engaging these themes.² It is impossible to fully understand what Carol Margaret Davison terms the “female/feminist Gothic lens” in these two novels without intersectionally scrutinizing these complex, diversely Gothic representations of childhood and everything that comes with it (“Theorizing Race, Slavery, and the New Imperial Gothic” 47).

Young childhood and the processes through which children are brought into the world formed an unsurprising site of racial anxiety for white authors of both canonical European Gothic novels and colonial fiction and travel narratives with Gothic elements. Racist fears surrounding miscegenation, which was not unusually treated as a sort of Gothic horror, were just one reason for this attitude toward youth and its potential imports. In her 1897 novel *The Blood of the Vampire*, British author Florence Marryat imagines a woman protagonist whose multiracial identity concretizes these fears; as H. L. Malchow explains, the “vampire bat’s bite” that her mother experiences while pregnant “is in fact nearly superfluous” since it is the woman’s racial heritage that most directly results in the destruction of her “perverted, unnaturally constructed” body (170-72). In Matthew Gregory Lewis’s earlier *The Isle of Devils*, the villain or “Fiend” is a supernatural being whose wickedness deepens when he not only impregnates a Portuguese virgin but also, as Davison notes, “destroys himself and their child” once the child’s mother abandons them (“Anglo-Caribbean Gothic” 28). Lewis was the white British proprietor of two Jamaican sugar plantations, and despite the “unease” that Lisa Nevárez describes him feeling “as a colonial and a slave owner” whose inherited wealth was rooted in the labor of enslaved people, his writings relentlessly perpetuate the deeply racist stereotype of the sexually dangerous Black male predator whose gothically horrifying identity is embodied in both the life and the death of a mixed-race child. Indeed, while Nevárez reinterprets the Fiend’s act of violence as a “way of communicating his love” for his child, Lewis’s portrayal also unambiguously reinforces this form of anti-Blackness. Such textual examples provide a window into the complex literary position of young children whose multiracial identities led them to be imagined simultaneously as hapless victims and as vectors of racial contagion in the minds of writers influenced by white supremacist thinking.

Historically, young children in the colonial context were also seen as essential to projects of imperialist indoctrination and control. Primary education for colonial subjects functioned as a faulty justification for imperialism, allowing the white

citizens of the metropole to believe in the civilizing impulse of the mythological white savior. At the same time, colonial systems of education were meant to serve as a means of consolidating imperial power: a way of producing malleable and compliant colonial subjects. Colonial children who could not be controlled or forced to conform to imperialist dictums, whether through systems of education or otherwise, inversely posed a unique threat to imperial power: not only did they symbolically represent all of the perceived ungovernability of “wild” colonial spaces as seen through white imperialist eyes, but they also had the potential to grow up to be concretely as well as metaphorically threatening to the mechanisms of empire and even to the social fabric of the metropole. This particular peril comes to fruition, for instance, in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, where ambiguously racialized Bertha Mason appears in Gothic-hued scenes as the product of an incomplete colonial education that, while providing her with superficial “charms and accomplishments” (352), has failed to suppress her “bad, mad, and embruted” character and “pigmy intellect” (337, 353). In Brontë’s portrayal, the danger that Bertha poses to the physical well-being of Jane and Mr. Rochester is symbolically rendered as a threat to the security of a wholesome English society.

Meanwhile, for postcolonial Caribbean women writers, early childhood has often functioned as a natural point of entry for politically important conversations about historical and continuing patterns of colonial oppression. In colonial contexts across the generations, especially under slavery, neither mothers’ experiences of conception, childbirth, and child-rearing nor children’s own experiences in their early lives could be fully understood without also accounting for Black women’s identities as survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by white men. These racialized and gendered acts of violence, like white women’s own histories of subjugation, are resoundingly depicted as Gothic horrors in the postcolonial literary imagination—something we can see not only in *La Migration des coeurs* but in other novels by Condé such as *Moi, Tituba sorcière*, which begins with the eponymous narrator’s account of the assault that led to her birth. As one of Condé’s secondary characters reminds us in *La Migration des coeurs*, the houses of the white Creole families in her narrative are “filled with the sighs and sorrows of black, mulatto and white women united in the same subjection. Slaves raped by sadistic planters. . . . Virgins sold to old men for money and parcels of land” (50). Even for women who managed to evade these various threats posed by white masculinity to their personhood, the experience of pregnancy nevertheless remained inextricably linked with the threat of death, and conditions of colonial oppression lent new and disturbing meaning to the very idea of birthing and raising children. Against this backdrop, narratives like Condé’s and Kincaid’s Gothic retellings—which follow women through horrific, often deadly experiences of pregnancy and childbirth and which chronicle their children’s fraught early youth—become opportunities both to scrutinize the persistence of colonial injustice and to envision rebellions against the colonizer. When fictional children emerge from each text who embody the Gothic qualities of the environments in which they are immersed, they become variously useful to

the textual project of resisting imperialism, whether they inspire a sense of terror in readers that underscores the horrors of the colonial state or whether their Gothic identities are painted as the seat of their power to undermine imperial and neo-colonial systems. In either case, classically European Gothic conventions tend to mix with non-Western cultural influences that, rendered gothically, give these narratives an aura of aesthetic innovation that accompanies their subversive and strategic acts of appropriation.

Reading Condé and Kincaid together for their shared deployments of genre underscores the importance of Gothic early childhood and the other preoccupations that accompany it to projects of political resistance across a diverse body of contemporary Caribbean women's writing. This act of comparative reading—which is not uncommon in studies of Condé and Kincaid in general but which readers have rarely pursued in considering the gothicism of their writings—also showcases how these two postcolonial writers have resisted and countered the weaponization of colonial childhood in imperialist ideology and literary production as a means of rationalizing and enacting oppression. If Condé and Kincaid “augment the picture of women as subjects and objects of globalization” that Louise Yelin describes us as receiving “from empirical studies and theoretical accounts,” this process of augmentation gains much from their strategic use of Gothic tropes in accounts of women's and children's lives under colonialism (446).

Wuthering Heights Transferred: Condé's Gothic Childhoods

La Migration des coeurs draws a sharp line of demarcation between the Gothic imaginings of racist whites, which are often biting parodies, and the larger significance of the Gothic to the narrative's racialized world. A particular flashpoint for these distinctions is the multiracial identities of the novel's children, which are imagined variously through Gothic lenses whose particulars vary along racial lines. Significantly, the word “horror” appears in moments when Condé's narrator records white racial anxieties through free-indirect discourse, as when she describes the younger Cathy (often referred to by readers as Cathy II) and her tenuous relationship with the white Creole family of the man she believes to be her father, Aymeric de Linsseuil: “[N]obody knew exactly how to treat her, especially now that puberty had darkened her skin unacceptably. The family was constantly in a quandary, divided between the remnants of their affection and the horror she represented” (228-29). Although Cathy by this time has left early childhood behind, what is terrifying to Condé's cast of white characters is the specter of miscegenation that she continues to represent. In looking on their young relative through the lens of white hysteria that the passage critiques, the de Linsseuil family sees an “unnaturally constructed” (Malchow 172) multiracial body whose very conception and birth have challenged their own racialized constructions of self. Similar passages appear throughout the novel. One chapter narrated by Cathy's

aunt recounts her decision to name her infant son after her “brother . . . in hope that this saint’s name would triumph over the bad blood that blackened his veins” (105). This “bad blood” is racialized as literally “black” as well as figuratively evil or “bad”; it is the blood of the child’s father, Razyé, whose own dark complexion and uncertain parentage led Cathy’s mother and namesake to scorn him when she began to “prefer those with white skin,” like Aymeric (82).

In another scene, the Black servant Mabo Sandrine refers to “African blood” as “treacherous,” musing that it “circulates in secret, then reappears one day at the moment when you least expect it,” so that it is unsurprising when Cathy II’s “Bambara ancestress . . . decide[s] to take her revenge” by thus marking her body (201). Here, however, there is a crucial difference: although Mabo Sandrine associates Blackness with the quintessentially Gothic trope of revenge, she refuses to demonize or fear it, instead casting Cathy’s body as a productive site of resistance. In specifically naming Cathy’s Bambara woman ancestor and imagining her act of vengeance, Mabo Sandrine both defies the purposeful white suppression of African-descended peoples’ genealogical knowledge and reimagines Cathy’s identity from birth as a weapon deployed subversively against anti-Blackness. While the Gothic illusions indulged by Condé’s white characters testify to the extent of their racial anxiety, Mabo Sandrine posits an alternate understanding of a Gothic trope and the child’s identity that it inflects. This is just one introductory example of how, in the hands of Condé’s narrators and characters of color, Gothic depictions of childhood from conception onward become a gateway not only to witnessing white cruelty and violence but also to suggesting forms of resistance embodied by children. Not insignificantly, this passage is also a telling example of what Jason Frydman calls the “[g]ossip, public opinion, and popular supernatural philosophies” that “mark the gothic [in Condé] as a local form, unsettling the genealogical indebtedness of Caribbean gothic to the English Gothic tradition” (239).

If the passages quoted above capture how Condé’s characters subjectively perceive Gothic elements in the identities of the young people who surround them, there is also a strong current of gothicism that underlies the narrative’s plot and that revolves equally around the conception, carrying to term, and eventual birth of children. It is not only that the conception of children in Condé’s novel is so often linked to acts of sexual violence by white men and their cruel responses to these crimes, though this is quite true: one woman describes how, after her mother is raped by a sailor on “the slave ship that carried her to the land of her degradation,” she gives birth “to a little girl the colour of curdled milk whom her new master, Amédée de Linsseuil, christened ‘Snow’ as a joke” (67). Like the act of violence itself, the mockery that the new mother endures is gothically horrifying. Such moments “make slavery comprehensible through and inseparable from the Gothic’s conventional scenes of cruelty,” as Teresa A. Goddu says of the African American Gothic slave narrative, in this case with particular attention to the mutually constitutive influence of gendered and racial oppression (74). In *La Migration des coeurs*, the experience of pregnancy tends to be fraught regardless of the

circumstances from which it arises, associated with death more than the creation of new life. After choosing to marry Aymeric de Linsseuil, young Cathy's mother in pregnancy becomes "nothing but a bag of bones," with "withered skin" that has "yellowed" and a body "misshapen by Nature" (80). Condé departs markedly from Brontë's original description of Catherine Linton's appearance just before her death, where she is characterized as having an "unearthly beauty" and a newly plump face whose "haggard aspect [had] vanished as she recovered flesh" (152). Rather than fetishizing Cathy's "paleness" as a sort of eerie loveliness (Brontë 152), Condé's intensified version situates whiteness or the lightening of skin at the center of a repulsive image of impending death, pointedly reversing rather than simply appropriating the racialized association of darkness with the Gothic in so many European works. It also suggests a social atmosphere so sickened by corruption and cruelty that the contagiousness of these elements and the disfigurement that follows are inescapable. Importantly, the sources of this corruption are painted as Euro-American in nature, encompassing both the history of European colonialism in Guadeloupe and the US incursions into nearby Cuba on which Condé's characters repeatedly comment, which together form an interlocking system of oppression of which the USA is also far from innocent. The repeated references to Razyé's "life in Cuba" cited by Maria Cristina Fumagalli (257) take on new importance as keys to the larger social context in which this horrifying version of pregnancy takes shape, where the US thirst for power, for instance, leads to the appearance of the USS *Maine* "alongside the Castillo del Morro" and arouses Razyé's suspicions about "what ... America [is] up to now" (Condé 13). Such references to the chronology of the Spanish American War and the longer arc of US neo-imperialism in the Caribbean, read in tandem with the novel's Gothic images of childhood and its antecedents, suggest that the military presence and hegemonic impulses of the USA contribute substantially to the poisoning of the transnational cultural space.

Even when the relationships between pregnancy, childbirth, and death are more incidental, associative, or figurative, their connections remain equally affecting. The elder Cathy's sister-in-law dies of tuberculosis not long after giving birth, leaving behind a son who refuses to mourn "her pale cheeks, her colourless eyes and her strands of lifeless hair" (133). This condition of early motherlessness is quintessentially Gothic and will repeat multigenerationally throughout the novel, sometimes inspiring painful, haunted dreams like the ones Razyé has about his own mother without a "face" he can assign to her from memory (38; also see Anolik). Later, telling the story of the day she was born, Mabo Sandrine recalls the way that both her birth and the abolition of slavery with which it coincided were overshadowed by memories of "Bonaparte's soldiers," who "had hung clusters of blacks and mulattos from every available tree" during the invasion of Guadeloupe (195). In passages where Gothic fears of a pregnancy rooted in incest take hold, Condé's narrator uses classically Gothic language to capture both the quotidian reality of carrying a child and the expectant mother's fearful imaginings. Cathy II's unborn child is as "savage

and violent as an Arab horse, kicking the sides of her womb with its hoofs,” so that she begins to imagine it as a “prisoner” instead of simply picturing the fetus as “fruit [that] would rot and drop of its own accord” (308, 312). Both the trope of imprisonment and the image of rotting flesh are quintessentially Gothic, invoking eighteenth-century works like Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* as much as they recall Lydia Cooper’s vision of Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian novels and their “horror-drenched . . . grotesque” (41; see also Six). These affinities remain even as Condé makes an entirely distinct point about the realities of multiracial women’s and children’s lives within a persisting matrix of white supremacist and colonial oppression. As the novel progresses, the seeming nonexistence of pregnancy and birth without death’s shadow becomes a defining characteristic of these lives and experiences, functioning as a ubiquitous Gothic curse.

Condé’s portrayal of Cathy II’s pregnancy is complicated by the actual birth, which results in Cathy’s death but produces a beautiful baby girl in contravention to the fears of both her mother and her father, “Razýé II”—the latter also having worried that the infant would be “a little monstrous being” (128, 307). As Jacqueline Padgett neatly summarizes, “some readers see some hope in this ending,” while others argue “that Condé’s ending closes the door on the family’s future,” with Razýé II’s final conviction that such “a lovely child” as his Anthuria “could not be cursed” resounding ironically and ominously (112; 348). This uncomfortable uncertainty mirrors the variegated experiences of the young children who appear throughout the novel, by turns blissfully unaware of the Gothic horrors that will shape their lives and wise beyond their years in assessing and responding to these realities. Aymeric bitterly reflects that the children who attend his nephew’s funeral “did not know what lay ahead for them” in their future encounters with “life and its wickedness,” echoing Razýé’s remembrances of his early life with Cathy, when “as little heathens” they “roamed wild and free” (209, 82). Meanwhile, the clairvoyant Madhi recalls an infancy in which he “could already see all the suffering stored up for [his] race,” and Mabo Sandrine is still a small child when she begins working on the plantation where her mother has given birth to her, an activity she describes using Gothic imagery: “At the age of five I staggered around carrying wood,” she remembers, calling up the common image of protagonists made weak and unsteady by illness or shock that surfaces in a number of canonical Euro-American Gothic texts (215).³

Add to this the often terrifying and desolate atmosphere that pervades the home lives of many of the young children, and we have a resoundingly Gothic recipe for constructions of childhood, with significant implications for the novel’s vision of colonial history. When Razýé II returns with his infant daughter to his father’s childhood home, l’Engoulvent, it is a foreboding place as dominated by “shadowy shapes” and “spirits” as it is overgrown with “scrub and thornbushes” (345). As Padgett rightly notes, the return to the house seems to portend the return of a new generation to the bleak conditions under which Razýé II was raised, from which

³ Joyce Carol Oates’s anthology *American Gothic Tales* contains at least half a dozen narratives that use this same phrasing, including Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” and Poe’s “The Black Cat.”

he is determined to shelter his daughter and himself in his quest to “lead quite a different life” (237). What is sometimes unspoken in such readings is the Gothic operation of this repetition as a curse passed down from one generation to the next, one that is emphatically embedded in the architectural and natural landscape of the children’s lives as well as the behavior of the adults who surround them. Likewise, if, as Françoise Lionnet argues, baby Anthuria’s “malediction” is “rooted in the secret, narcissistic, and incestuous desires of her ancestors,” who were unable to admit their love for one another because of its implications in a world dominated by “discourses of racial superiority” (“Narrating the Americas” 85), this secret-keeping at once reinforces the Gothic quality of the novel’s childhoods and underscores the larger importance of Gothic conventions in capturing these enduring impacts of white supremacy. Infancy and young childhood, rendered gothically in this way, are essential to the political work of the text.

While these children are catapulted into a premature adulthood by their Gothic surroundings, other scenes envelop young children in gothicism to such a degree that they become complexly a part of this threatening atmosphere rather than simply being acted upon by it. Early in the novel, on the night young Razyé arrives at l’Engoulvent, a hurricane threatens the house. In that scene, both Cathy and Razyé are painted as part and parcel of the encroaching storm, which inspires Cathy to stand “in front of a wide open window” so that “her nightgown ballooned around her like the sail of a boat out at sea, and it looked as though she was about to take flight” (20). For his own part, Razyé, whom Cathy’s father finds “on the heath,” responds to the man’s approach by biting his hand “like a mongoose” (21). It is this sort of “wildness,” as the older Razyé terms it—a Gothic ungovernability shared by the landscape and the children who occupy it—that Razyé refers to when he remembers “all the happiness” that the children experience before an adolescent Cathy becomes so invested in questions of wealth and whiteness (82). Although it is true that Condé’s novels generally refuse “any form of nostalgia” and decline to “idealize political commitment, nature, or the people” (Lionnet, “Traversée” 477), there is nevertheless an interest here in the power that the two children hold so long as they refuse to be concerned with “white skin” and speaking “fancy French” (Condé 82), which in this early scene is viscerally embodied in the uncanny synergy of their identities with the natural environment and the way that all three challenge the adult world around them.⁴ Although neither child manages to carry this synergy into adulthood, *La Migration des coeurs* nevertheless gestures toward the radical potential of childhood to resist received notions of race and the colonial systems of power that they uphold, both in the novel’s historical past and, by extension, in the continuing colonial and neo-imperialist moment in which it was written and published.

At other times, the gothicism of young children themselves manifests powerfully in their deaths and the hauntings that result, as when the de Linsseuil twins “drowned in a pond under the eyes of their nursemaid” or when Cathy II is haunted by the memory of the servant whom “she had sent to her death with her son”

⁴ In one interview, Condé commented that “nature has a power, a presence”: that it is sometimes “furious, and you have to pay attention to it” (Lewis and Condé 549).

before another violent storm (57, 311). These deaths of innocent children and the hauntings that ensue have varied political implications, sometimes suggesting a curse on white Creole families guilty of perpetrating generations of suffering and sometimes commenting more broadly on intersecting colonial systems of racial and socioeconomic injustice to which the novel's women and children prove particularly vulnerable. What these references have in common is their deployment of gothically horrifying children, not just Gothic childhoods, in the service of these sorts of commentaries. Still other variations on the trope of Gothic youth emerge as Condé's fictional young people fall prey to classically Gothic preoccupations, consumed with the feelings of "greed, envy and ambition" that Sian MacArthur particularly associates with the American Gothic tradition (117). Notably, these emotions also prove formative in *Wuthering Heights*, with its trenchant rendering of what Terry Eagleton tersely describes as the "upper-class marriage market" in eighteenth-century Britain (126) as well as the more broadly humanist themes of "vengeance and cruelty" that Tutun Mukherjee finds in the novel's pages (98). In *La Migration des coeurs*, the envy and ambition of children are most visible in scenes that return us to the starting point of this section: the question of multiracial identity and the perceived threat of Blackness. In resenting the young Razyé as a "ragamuffin, come from goodness knows where," Cathy's brother Justin-Marie is responding aggressively to Razyé's ambiguous but threatening racial identity, which provokes him in spite of or perhaps even because of his own Black ancestors (22). The "little black boy or Indian half-caste" attracts Justin-Marie's envy and ignites his feelings of greed not only because he has drawn attention away from Justin-Marie himself but also because this new object of the household's affection is unworthy according to the dictates of white supremacy and colorism (21). While Justin-Marie is a young adult when his father dies and he banishes Razyé from the house "to the fields with the Indians," the roots of this racially and socioeconomically inflected decision lie in Justin-Marie's earlier childhood experiences of jealousy and his Gothic cravings for love and revenge (27). In Condé's hands, this absence of innocence from much of colonial childhood becomes a way of underscoring the insidious nature of colonial power, which rests on fictions of class and racial superiority to which multiracial children prove equally susceptible.

In an interview published not long after the appearance of her husband's English translation of *La Migration des coeurs*, Condé responded to the interviewer's characterization of the novel as "ambivalen[t] about the need to be political and the things that work against it," commenting,

I cannot prevent myself from thinking about political ideas, political fight, political struggles. But 30 years ago I was convinced that the conclusion of the fight would be positive – that we shall get to liberation, that we shall get to the end of colonialism. Now I know that we have fought sincerely, bravely, and that nothing happened and . . . okay, we have to face it. (Wolff and Condé)

It is useful, I think, to consider the specific impact of *La Migration des coeurs* and its gothicism within this “ambivalent” space. This is a novel that carefully avoids didacticism and painfully confronts ambiguity, eschewing the binaristic vision of good and evil that is traditionally associated with and problematized by Gothic narratives like Brontë’s. The young Razyé grows into a man who abuses and neglects his children, who routinely assaults his white Creole wife and brags about having successfully managed to “humiliate” her, and whose entrance into radical political activity is facilitated by the community’s knowledge of these very crimes (115). These confrontations with ambiguity and ambivalence are essential to a novel that grapples comprehensively with interlocking forms of colonial, racial, and gender-based oppression and their multigenerational ramifications. Within this complicated textual universe, Condé’s Gothic renderings of young childhood and its antecedents also play an important role, engaging similar ambiguities and complexities: white women, too, suffer gothically in pregnancy; children of color turn enviously and vengefully on each other; and currents of youthful resistance give way to pathologically racialized constructions of the self.

In general, however, the novel itself seems far more politically effective than the machinations of its characters, and the narrative’s array of Gothic tropes are an important ingredient in that effectiveness. Terrifying experiences of sexual violence, pregnancies filled with deathly foreboding, and curses and cruelty that follow both women and their children all work in the service of a broader anti-colonial vision that, as Condé herself points out, remains intensely relevant to twenty-first-century Guadeloupe—a vision that, I would add, also has its own importance for an array of Caribbean spaces shadowed by contemporary US neo-imperialism. The Gothic specters of dead, innocent children and the susceptibility of children to Gothic moral failings work from opposite directions toward the same end, forging a moving critique of the system that has animated both. Meanwhile, Cathy’s and Razyé’s brief period of rebellion against the received wisdom of white supremacy situates Gothic youth as a still possible, persisting site of resistance to the continuing matrix of racial and colonial power. Zeroing in on Gothic childhood in *La Migration des coeurs* renders especially visible the ways in which the novel, in addition to admitting “the things that work against” political activity, operates through a culturally multivalent set of conventions to forge its own brand of anti-colonial literary activism.

“They Were by Then All Dead”: Kincaid’s Uncanny Children

As a rewriting of *Wuthering Heights* and as a story of Gothic childhood, Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* is in obvious ways a very different book from Condé’s. Just one example of these departures is the gender-bending transition through which Kincaid’s Xuela becomes, in Paravisini-Gebert’s eyes, an answer to Brontë’s Heathcliff rather than her Cathy (250). Still, Gothic tropes are repeated in Kincaid’s novel with an almost comforting regularity, unearthing transnational

and translinguistic connections between postcolonial women's writing across the Caribbean: connections that rely on constructions of childhood and its antecedents for their expression.

Kincaid's first-person narrator, Xuela, is deeply attuned to matters of race, which she accesses through Gothic imagery that upends received white understandings of racial identity. Like Mabo Sandrine, she is interested in an almost metaphysical way in the business of multiracial identity as it inflects the experiences of children, although her greater concern is with the insidious hauntings of whiteness: "My father had inherited the ghostly paleness of his own father," she explains, "the skin that looks as if it is waiting for another skin, a real skin" (49). Resisting the white supremacist notions of European parentage as an ennobling trait and whiteness as the standard for physical normality, Xuela's image of the ancestral ghost suggests that the specter of his own father's whiteness haunts her father and literally occupies his body from the time of his birth. Such passages give an even more painful resonance to Xuela's memory of how "at Massacre . . . Indian Warner, the illegitimate son of a Carib woman and a European man, was murdered by his half brother, an Englishman named Philip Warner, because Philip Warner did not like having such a close relative whose mother was a Carib Indian" (87).⁵ As in Condé's novel, while white colonials imagine Gothic horror and degradation in the multiraciality of children and the adults they grow up to be, the real terror lies in these acts of white violence and the hauntings that ensue. To have skin "the color of corruption," as Xuela says of her father later in the narrative, is to be forced from infancy to wear the mark of this same white colonial oppressor on one's body (181).

Sexual violence as an intersectional site of racial and gendered injustice remains a meaningful undercurrent here, although it is less ubiquitous than in *La Migration des coeurs*, with Kincaid emphasizing Xuela's burgeoning ability "to understand, control, and enjoy her own sexuality," as Donna Bailey Nurse phrases it (50). This aspect of Xuela's character is itself a culturally particularized Gothic element that reworks the European colonizer's horrified imagining "of the Carib people as," in Kathryn E. Morris's words, "ravenously sexual and cannibalistic" (954). Where women's experiences prove gothically deadly rather than gothically self-affirming is in the state of pregnancy and the process of childbirth. *The Autobiography of My Mother* begins with such a scene of death: "My mother died at the moment I was born," Xuela explains in the narrative's first line. The opening passage also describes Xuela's subsequent motherlessness as leaving her exposed to a "bleak, black wind" or to "the black room of the world" (3), invoking a physical vocabulary of desolation and loneliness that recalls how, as Ruth Heholt notes, "landscapes haunt particularly the heroines of Gothic fictions" in the European tradition (243). Xuela re-announces the death of her mother several times throughout the arc of the narrative, making maternal mortality into another specter that haunts the text just as her own mother haunts her dreams, never showing more than "her heels . . . and the hem of her gown" (18). The echoes of Razyé's faceless mother are palpable here, intensifying the haunting and linking the two novels in their Gothic characterizations

⁵ Others, like Adair, read Xuela's comments as occluding "the history of Carib sovereignty" and "Carib resistance to colonization" (52).

of motherless youth, where dreams are understood to be bound up, in the words of Brontë's Nelly, with distressing "ghosts and visions" (77)—though *Wuthering Heights* contains no such allusions to Heathcliff's inner life as a child mourning his parents during sleep. Speaking of her mother's death, Xuela tells us that her parents "were married in a church in Roseau and within a year she was buried in its churchyard" (201). While Xuela's loss of her mother in childbirth reads more as a tragic act of fate than an event traceable to specific political circumstances, viewing the tragedy in tandem with the deaths of the young mothers in *La Migration des coeurs* casts it as a byproduct of a transnationally and gothically cursed atmosphere, one that has forestalled the possibility of uncomplicated and lasting happiness in colonial and post-independence Caribbean spaces, with sharply drawn consequences for women and young children in particular.

In such an environment, it is unsurprising that Kincaid's narrator would choose to studiously avoid bearing children of her own, seeking an abortion for her first pregnancy and later feeling "overjoyed at the accuracy of [her] prediction[s]" when, month after month, she turns out to have successfully evaded the possibility of conception (175). This textual detail has been used to connect *The Autobiography of My Mother* to more widely read works like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which Jana Evans Braziel parallels with Kincaid's novel in this respect: as Sethe does in *Beloved*, Braziel argues,

Xuela kills her *beloved* children, rather than see them brutalized, maimed, or killed under systems of racial oppression. Xuela, in her refusal of motherhood, thus not only resists colonialist appropriations of black female bodies and their stolen children ... she also powerfully reveals within her births made (historically) impossible, nations disallowed, people destroyed through genocide in the Caribbean and in the Americas. (125)

Braziel is right to point out the way that Xuela's actions resonate on a political level as well as at the level of personally felt trauma. While Xuela sometimes casts her refusal to have children as a simple refusal to cause them pain in the way that she was hurt by the loss of her mother, this studious avoidance of the larger ramifications of her choice reads as a form of evasion that is easily seen through. If both Condé's and Kincaid's novels locate their critique of colonialism partly in the pain and lethality of pregnancy, Kincaid, like Morrison, also deploys her woman narrator's reasoned refusal to participate in this cycle of conception, pain, and death toward similar narrative ends. Childbirth, childhood, and their absence are all equally vital. What again is often overlooked is the way that Gothic tropes contribute to and in this case even complicate such critiques, linking Kincaid to a larger transnational tradition of Gothic texts by Black writers in the Americas—a tradition to which African American texts like *Beloved* have been central (see Wester).

Xuela's feelings about the prospect of pregnancy are tinged with Gothic imagery: on learning that she is in fact pregnant, she feels "terror" and envisions herself

“standing in a black hole,” using phrasing that echoes her reflections at the start of the novel (81-82). Experiences of infertility as part of what Caroline Rody terms the narrative’s “maternal fixation” (109) are also gothically inflected: Kincaid’s narrator describes one woman’s womb as “shriveled, dried, like a fruit that has lost all its juice” and envisions another woman with a “broken womb” as “a remnant, fossil-like... a vector of malaise” (76, 157). It might at first seem that Xuela—in her triumph at having evaded pregnancy purposefully—lives outside this set of painful conditions. Still, the close of the novel suggests a different result. There, Xuela flatly announces, “This account of my life has been an account of my mother’s life as much as it has been an account of mine, and even so, again it is an account of the life of the children I did not have, as it is an account of me. In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from” (228). At the simplest level of interpretation, Xuela’s words describe how, in telling her own story, she has also related important truths about the life of her mother and about her own evasion of pregnancy and childbirth. Read in tandem with the title of the book, however, Xuela’s pronouncement suggests something substantially less prosaic and more Gothic in nature: that in a metaphysical sense, she and her mother are synonymous with one another, so that her autobiography can also be termed “the autobiography of [her] mother,” the woman whose name she shares.⁶ This variation on the trope of the Gothic double is present in both *Wuthering Heights* and *La Migration des coeurs*, where “the instability of the boundaries of the self” (as Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik put it in discussing Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*) is placed in relief by the protagonists’ existence as “aspects of each other” (84). In Kincaid and Condé, however, and in the socio-historical context of the postcolonial Caribbean, this gothically inflected concept has special significance. It suggests that even essential changes in the fabric of one’s life as a woman—like the decision not to bear children—cannot alter the multigenerational curse of colonial identity enough to produce a stably distinguishable self with a distinct, brighter future. Through these Gothic imaginings of the relationship between mother and child, *The Autobiography of My Mother* treads carefully in balancing Xuela’s expressions of agency and her reclamations of her body with these chilling pronouncements on which the novel’s political critique also rests.

As in Condé’s novel, many of these passages capture the Gothic lens through which both novels’ characters understandably view the events of their lives. There are also parts of Kincaid’s novel that paint young children as themselves Gothic in personality, recalling Condé’s Cathy and Razyé as well as the various dead children who haunt *La Migration des coeurs*. These are not just young people whose lives are full of gothically inflected troubles, from their motherlessness and the “brutality” of their guardians to the ways they are both literally and figuratively “cursed” (5, 9). Xuela also perpetrates her own horrifying acts of violence during her childhood, as in one scene where she holds three turtles captive, uses mud to cover “the small hole from which each neck would emerge,” and then forgets about them.

⁶ This challenges the argument that Xuela “does not tell the story of her Carib mother” (Maes-Jelenik and Ledent 188).

“When they came into my mind again,” she remembers, “I went to take a look at them in the place where I had left them. They were by then all dead” (12). Thus flatly described, Xuela’s own cruelty is intensified by her recourse to Gothic acts of imprisonment and vengeance: she is first provoked to teach the turtles “a lesson” after they “withdraw into their shells” when she wants to play with them (11). As Rebecca Romdhani suggests, this moment allows “slavery and its legacy” to be “played out by a child” who is compelled to act as “a careless god” (127). Here, it is the specifically Gothic horror of the scene that most effectively drives home the extent of history’s imprint on Xuela’s childhood identity (see also Paravisini-Gebert 251).

Unlike Cathy and Razyé’s self-proclaimed “wildness” in *La Migration des coeurs*, this is a case where a child’s own gothicism reads more as an indictment of the sociopolitical conditions that have created it than as a testament to the revolutionary power of children’s agency in resisting colonial superstructures. Xuela seems to have been forced into an uncontrollable cruelty that does not reflect who she might otherwise have become, and in this instance, what more politically generative effects this cruelty might have is unclear. At other times, however, Xuela’s Gothic personality is cast differently, especially as a potential catalyst for a different way of understanding racial hierarchies. Just as young Cathy and Razyé are at home in wild outdoor spaces like the one for which Razyé is named, Xuela as a child is comfortable with “the blanket of voluptuous blackness that was the night” (32). This positive characterization disrupts Eurocentric associations of Blackness with terror and complicates Xuela’s own earlier statements about her motherlessness as a “bleak, black wind” (3). Like Razyé (and unlike Brontë’s Heathcliff before them), Xuela also bites the hand of her new guardian when she first arrives in the woman’s home, subversively refusing to perform unearned expressions of “gratitude” for someone who will ultimately treat her cruelly (6). The *Chicago Tribune*’s 1996 review of the novel suggested that “[c]olonialism seems pale and tenuous and abstract” in the narrative “compared with the colorful cruelty of . . . the child who bites the hand who feeds her” (Mesic). Yet what such interpretations miss is how poignantly Xuela’s moment of rebellion mirrors the larger rejection of the discourse of white saviorism within the colonial project—a parallel that remains palpable in this moment despite the fact that Xuela’s guardian, like Razyé’s, is a person of color. Inverting the traditional implications of the Gothic vampire’s bite, both Razyé and Xuela perform Gothic acts of resistance that gesture toward the seemingly innate power of children to perceive and physically reject fictions of benevolence, by violent means if necessary. Unlike the childhood acquaintance of Xuela who dies by drowning and who subsequently haunts her thoughts, they refuse to be victimized or to quietly “disappear” (36). In all of these moments, Kincaid effects a large-scale upending of expectations surrounding the European Gothic rather than a straightforward appropriation of those conventions toward a subversive thematic end.

Gothic Appropriations and Reinventions

There are examples throughout Condé's and Kincaid's novels that illustrate how postcolonial Caribbean women writers not only appropriate but also distinctly edit European Gothic conventions, drawing on a vaster and richer repository of cultural reference points for Gothic writing. In some instances, it is primarily gothicism's import that changes. What in Brontë's hands functions as a way to critique interlacing class structures or "rigidly differentiated . . . gender identities," as Beth Newman terms them (27), becomes for Condé or Kincaid a method of deconstructing the racialized and gendered workings of the colonial enterprise. In other moments, the nature of what is Gothic itself subtly shifts in tandem with these altered meanings: a greater emphasis on images of rot and decay becomes a way to emphasize the corruption of the colonial and neo-imperial state, or the fetishization of dark skin is replaced with passages that highlight the physical repulsivity of an aberrant whiteness, or non-Western religious traditions lend their particular aesthetic and logic to the gothicism of an image. Such adjustments echo the broader cultural inheritances of Caribbean spaces shaped by diaspora as well as the particular literary traditions of a transnational African-descended American Gothic. While this duality of appropriation and alteration is not new in readings of the postcolonial Gothic, Condé's and Kincaid's narratives shed new light on the central place of stories that extend from conception through childbirth and young childhood to these projects. Sexual violence, doomed pregnancies and expectant mothers, motherless children, and their Gothic lives and personalities all contribute to a tapestry of sociopolitical oppression with specific, deeply painful ramifications for women and children in colonial contexts. In Condé's and Kincaid's hands, a shared Gothic artistry becomes a way of making these ramifications increasingly, affectingly visible across linguistic and geographic boundaries. In both *La Migration des coeurs* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*, however, children's Gothic identities function equally as a site of resistance that highlights the subversive potential of childhood to dismantle and disempower colonial ideologies and the systems they uphold.

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