MISTRESS AND MOTHER AND GODDESS—ENOUGH TO MAKE YOU LAUGH
TRANSFORMATION THROUGH CONTRAST IN WILMA STOCKENSTRÖM’S
THE EXPEDITION TO THE BAOBAB TREE

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A Thesis

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Abstract

MISTRESS AND MOTHER AND GODDESS—ENOUGH TO MAKE YOU LAUGH
TRANSFORMATION THROUGH CONTRAST IN WILMA STOCKENSTRÖM’S
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by
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Written during the riotous fall of South African Apartheid, Wilma Stockenström’s
stream-of-consciousness novella Die kremetartekspedisie, translated into English by J.M.
Coetzee as The Expedition to the Baobab Tree, is recognized as the first full-length
Afrikaans text written from the perspective of a black African woman. It has been hailed
as demonstrating new liberality of the Afrikaner consciousness but also assailed as
usurpation of the Shona cultural voice. Analysis of textual symbolism with regard to
Herbert Aschwanden’s Shona Heritage books and of the text’s verisimilar qualities with
reference to Julia Kristeva’s Revolution in Poetic Language together reveal textual
parallels between the post-Apartheid Shona woman and the newly feminist Afrikaner
woman, suggesting that traditional feminine paradigms of both cultures limit women’s
possibilities and that a new hybrid, powerful vision of woman is needed.

_____________________________________, Committee Chair
Chauncey Ridley, Ph.D.

_____________________________________
Date

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PREFACE

“[The parrot] turned language inside out so that the meaning fell out and nothing could be said” “…and like a bird into a nest I can slip back into a treentrunk and laugh to myself.”

Police opened fire on over 15,000 school children between the ages of ten and twenty who were protesting the adoption of Afrikaans as the sole language of instruction in so-called “Bantu Education.” “How can a child know who he is if he is not allowed to use his own language?” asks activist ModisePhekonyane; “Afrikaans was undermining every other language” (Rothstein). This clash, wherein the slaughter of dozens of children by police led to the looting and burning of government building, rocked South Africa in 1976. It would be another fifteen years before Apartheid legislation such as sparked the riots would be repealed, but a cultural shift had begun. In 1981, Wilma Stockenström’s *Die kremetartekspedisie* was published.

Stockenström’s text is briefly considered in Judy H. Gardner’s 1991 *Impaired Vision: Portraits of Black Women in the Afrikaans Novel 1948-1988*. In contextualizing her own study, Gardner associates the increase in portrayals of black African women with a concurrent explosion in the number of female Afrikaner writers, about whom she says, “[The Afrikaner woman] is [traditionally] subordinate [to the man] and [is] banished to the periphery of important events in the Afrikaner political and economic life” (18). She also notes the “close proximity” of black and white women though much of a typical day of domestic chores (181). Gardner evaluates Stockenström’s text as “evidence
and reflection of the black woman’s devalued status in South African society, but also as evidence of the power of . . . resistance to apartheid” (227). Where is the resistance, though, in a text where the protagonist ultimately poisons herself after achieving freedom?

I conclude in the following analysis that Stockenström claims solidarity with her narrator, demonstrating symbolically that both black African women and Afrikaner women are oppressed by patriarchal cultural norms of femininity. The narrator’s transforming into a bat after drinking poison demonstrates a transcendence of cultural feminine constraints. Reading this from the perspective of Kristevan theory shows that a work of fiction can more truly reflect the truth about an author than can a work of non-fiction, and the expression of such internal truths creates openings such that the external world may be revised to more closely conform with them—one may adapt one’s surroundings to one’s evolving self, laughing at the expected singular interpretation of physical reality in order to re-envision one’s possibilities.

My hope in undertaking this project, the timeline for the completion of which has exceeded my initial expectations by a factor of five, is that my work may in some way contribute to liberation from tyranny of the Shona people of Zimbabwe and to oppressed peoples around the globe.
DEDICATION

To the women of my family:

My great-great-great grandmother Anna Curtis who survived days buried alive to evade soldiers and who later raised ten children;

My great-great grandmother Ella Massey who gave birth in a covered wagon;

My great-grandmother Bertha Hansen who fled Germany to escape an arranged marriage and then fled Nebraska to escape another;

My grandmother, Marcile Ahrenholtz who hitchhiked from Iowa to San Francisco, who was arrested on Mother’s Day protesting a nuclear facility, who proudly graduated high school after her five children did, who told me I could not fail in my endeavors because success is hereditary, and whom I greatly miss;

My mother, Janet Nielsen, who earned her English MA during Women’s Liberation only to later face discrimination because she chose to raise children before seeking to begin her profession—to whom, along with my father Ted who read to me on his lap, I owe my love for literature;

My sister Christine who has brought aid to people on four continents—refugees and disaster victims as well as those hungry only for knowledge;

My wife Emily Eby who has patiently and less patiently awaited my scholastic laurel as she waited to begin her nursing studies—she will be an exemplary medical professional;

My daughter Sonja who has a soft heart, a sharp mind, and a beckoning horizon.
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Chapter 1

BROAD STROKES

The nameless narrator of Wilma Stockenström’s 1981 Die kremetartekspedisie, translated into English by J. M. Coetzee as The Expedition to the Baobab Tree, opens her tale “with ridicule” (7) and concludes “I was really a mistress and mother and goddess. Enough to make you laugh” (111) after having told of her liberation following the “particularly laughable death” of her master (63). While such overt references to the tale’s irony are rare within the text, their placement suggests they should be taken to color its entirety.

This situates The Expedition to the Baobab Tree within a feminist tradition gaining prominence at the time, for one of the movement’s better known proponents—Julia Kristeva—in 1974’s La 1evolution du language poétique, translated into English and abridged by Margaret Waller as Revolution in Poetic Language in 1984, argues that “laughter… designates an irruption of the drives against symbolic prohibition” (222), through which irruption “contradiction is at its most acute… [and] drive rejection attacks what it itself has produced (signifying matter…) in order to check and subdue it” (179), which is “the ultimate means of [the social order’s] transformation or subversion, the precondition for its survival and revolution” (81). As it is Kristeva’s theoretical perspective which informs the following close reading of Stockenström’s text, the next chapter shall be devoted to it in some depth; however, for brief introduction, consider this
continuing sketch. Kristeva contends that in differentiating oneself from one’s surroundings one rejects the unitary experience of the womb. Out of this rejection arises symbolic meaning: affixing an object with a word makes concrete its differentiation from the perceiving self. In turn, such symbols limit the interpretations available to one, prohibiting interpretations outside the set of established symbols, yet the clarity with which each symbol conveys meaning may be compromised through an influence, such as laughter, which calls its accuracy into question. This creates a space within which one can re-define oneself with reference to this new rejection.

“With bitterness, then,” begins Stockenström’s narrator in telling her story, “But that I have forbidden myself. With ridicule, then, which is more affable, which keeps itself transparent and could not care less; and like a bird into a nest I can slip back into a treetrunk and laugh to myself. And keep quiet too, perhaps just keep quiet so as to dream outward, for the seventh sense is sleep. (7)

Reflecting on her experiences, the narrator recollects “the spiteful unmarried daughter” of her benefactor (46), who “was contaminated with bitterness” such that she “had the smell of someone who had become cancerous” (47) following a dispute with her sibling, “the eldest son” (46), after the death of their father. The narrator therefore eschews bitterness and laughs at the absurdity of her situation, being finally free from slavery yet stranded in a tree and without companionship. The ludicrousness of her story
as she tells it to the tree functions to contest the constraining authority of the symbols of femininity she has internalized from the cultures with which she has come into contact. She has not set out to undermine the cultural values these symbols represent but initially accepted the social roles open to her as meaningful; however, as new situations rendered each role ineffectual, she gradually acclimated to her new circumstances through the adoption of expected attitudes which again made her experience manageable. Finally, however, she finds the subject-positions provided—those of “mistress,” “mother,” and “goddess,” as well as, implicitly, “witch”—do not provide sufficient dimension for self-discovery. The narrator’s finding ridiculous her experience of the classical female social roles available to her serves “to disturb the logic that dominated the social order and do so through that logic itself, by assuming and unraveling its position, its syntheses, and hence the ideologies it controls” (Kristeva 83).

The narrator’s practice of dreaming outward creates for her a new path; one in which she does reach a manifestation of deity beyond that which the limited term “goddess” connotes. She—along with her water spirit and in fact “everything”—achieves universal crystallinity (Stockenström 101). Even so, she is “forced to live” in this dream whereas she is “not allowed to be human.”

Finally drinking crocodile-blood poison, the narrator transforms into a bat and swims across the dark water to find rest in the upside-down world (111) where she will “gain access to a new kind of dream” (93). Through sacrificing herself, she founds a new
symbolic order (Kristeva 75), undergoing a final episode of what Kristeva refers to as 
transposition—“an altering of the thetic position—the destruction of the old position and 
the formation of a new one” (59).

The transposition the narrator experiences, in addition to changing herself within 
the world of the text, symbolically calls for change in the real world. Within the world of 
the text, the narrator tells her own story as accurately as she is able, but besides the 
“internal level within the work, where the slave woman’s story is her own case history,” 
and where her experiences are confined to the world of the text, critic Stephen Gray 
refers—in his 1991 “Some Notes on Further Readings of Wilma Stockenström’s Slave 
Narrative, The Expedition to the Baobab Tree”—to “the symbolic, external level, where 
Stockenström is the writer of our own times, writing within the context of today” (54). 
Three symbiotically linked objects within the text—the narrator as bat representing 
women, the baobab representing Stockenström’s reader, and the water spirit representing 
that which Kristeva describes as the semiotic chora—symbolize real-world relations 
Stockenström’s writing calls to change. This representational aspect of the text 
exemplifies what Kristeva describes as mimesis: “the construction of an object, not 
according to truth but to verisimilitude” (57). That is, the text is fictional but conveys 
more of the author’s experience than would a non-fiction account. Thereby, the text 
serves to “question the very principle of the ideological”—the cultural assumptions to 
which the author is subject—and to “unfold the unicity of the thetic (the pre-condition for
meaning and signification) and prevent its theologization” (61). That is, the text presents a narrative demonstrating an alternate vision of reality such that culture’s perceived coherence is assailable and can no longer be assumed as divine truth. However, even as *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* undermines the prior dominant symbolic order, its symbolic idealization of a new order defies Kristevan political ideals of ongoing subjective redefinition.
Chapter 2

KRISTEVA’S SIGNIFICANCE: A PRACTICE FOR JOUISANCE AND REVOLUTION

Published in 1974, Julia Kristeva’s Doctoral Thesis La Révolution du langagepoétique places her early thought with reference to a number of her philosophical predecessors: Plato, Freud, Marx, Husserl, Hjelmslev, Frege, Derrida, and Hegel among others. However, for manageability, herein such relationships will only be illuminated to the extent that they inform definition of her ideas pertinent to this analysis. Too, while other aspects of Kristeva’s work—particularly concerning time, abjection and sacrifice—could be productively applied to interpreting The Expedition to the Baobab Tree, the present inquiry will focus on those aspects of the translation Revolution in Poetic Language central to the process by which Kristeva argues individuals transpose themselves and transform their cultures.

Kristeva grounds her perspective in the premise that there exist “two modalities”—“the semiotic” and “the symbolic” which “are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language” (24); “the dialectic between them [the modalities]” she continues “determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved.” Kristeva further argues that this dialectic “is constitutive of the subject”—“Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’ symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both.” Definition of
these modalities will clarify the manner of their dialectic as well as the ways in which their interaction via a signifying process manifests language acts and, further, accumulates subjectivity.

The first of the two, the semiotic modality, Kristeva describes with reference to Melanie Klein’s “theory expanding upon Freud’s positions of the drives” (27), noting that “This modality is the one Freudian psychoanalysis points to in postulating… the facilitation and the structuring disposition of the drives” (26). “‘Drives’ are always already ambiguous, simultaneously assimilating and destructive; this dualism, which has been represented… as a double helix… makes the semiotized body a place of permanent scission” (27). “The term ‘drive’ denotes waves of attack against stases, which are themselves constituted by the repetition of these charges” (28).

The semiotic provides what could be envisioned as a neural landscape: as in the case of the repeated passage of water over earth, so neural energies facilitate subsequent charges’ following the same path; the development of semiotic landscape disposes the waves constituting a drive to behave in the ways they do. The ambiguous nature of drives is comparable to water tearing down riverbanks only to later create sandbars, and as the sandbar may later be washed away, so accreted drive stases are assailed by subsequent waves.
In this semiotic space, the vehicle of drive activity is the “chora”—“an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases.”

Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed upon this body—always already involved in the semiotic process—by family and social structures. In this way the drives, which are ‘energy’ charges… articulate what we call a chora. (25)

“The chora, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality…. Although the chora can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the chora and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form” (26). Kristeva cites Plato, however, in describing the chora as “nourishing and maternal” (26). Expounding along the lines of Klein and Freud, she continues: “The mother’s body becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic chora” (27), and the chorais “where the subject is both generated and negated” (28), but it is not until the subject undergoes the “mirror stage” (as postulated by JaquesLacan) that he perceives “the constitution of objects detached from the semiotic chora…[for] positing the ego leads to the positing of the object” (46).
The *chora* is that mental assemblage in the individual which precedes the capacity for definition and for recognition of relationships in time, space, logic, and imagination. Before birth, one experiences unity with one’s mother, and the rhythms which inform one’s earliest development are those perceived via the mother’s body, which mediates the external world for the fetus. Even after one is born, for a time one does not recognize oneself as a distinct individual, yet neither does one experience oneself as limitless; one’s bounds, whether or not one is cognizant of them, inform one’s movement. The changing capacities in the *chora* under subjection of drive waves and stases facilitate one’s development of ego, one’s sense of self; however, conversely, these drives impel one to instinctive responses and, in doing so, erode one’s developing vision of oneself as unique.

For the first time, during the mirror stage, one recognizes oneself as separate from “the specular image” (46) of oneself in the mirror, and this (as well as, Kristeva asserts, “the discovery of castration,” which will not enter into the present discussion) brings about transition to a new modality: the symbolic. “Lacan maintains… that the specular image is the ‘prototype’ for the ‘world of objects’”—when one recognizes the mirror image as separate from but a visual representation of oneself, then one comes to recognize that one may also make use of visual representations to reference things other than the self.
“The precondition for signification, i.e., the precondition for the positing of language” (48) are associations Kristeva makes with what she calls “the thetic phase” or the “thetic break” arising out of the mirror phase.

All enunciation, whether of a word or a sentence, is thetic. It requires an identification; in other words, the subject must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects. This image and objects must first be posited in a space that becomes symbolic because it connects the two separated positions. (43)… The thetic phase marks a threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic. The second includes part of the first and their scission is thereafter marked by the break between signifier and signified. Symbolic would seem an appropriate term for this always split unification that is produced by a rupture and is impossible without it…. The “symbol” is any joining, any bringing together that is a contract… any exchange. (48-49)

Much as with the case of identifying the image of oneself in the mirror, using language separates oneself and the objects one identifies from one another as well as from that which remains undifferentiated. The act of naming a thing creates a symbolic relationship between the name and the thing—the name now stands for the thing, while at the same time, to name something is to divorce that thing from communion with oneself – labeling it cements its existence as distinct from oneself.
Reminiscent of the conundrum ‘If a tree falls where no-one can hear it, does it make a noise?’ the act of naming assists in conceiving of objects as existing independently of their observers. Kristeva further argues, all language in her view being propositional, that the substance of the proposition and the relationship it represents hides the speaker himself; “The thetic posits the signifiable object: it posits signification as both a denotation (of an object) and an enunciation (of a displaced subject, absent from the signified and signifying position)” (54). A statement’s “denotation” represents the state of that to which it refers. At the same time, the statement exists as an object in itself, as an “enunciation.” When one reads, it is the enunciation which communicates the denotation; however, the subject with whom the enunciation originated is not physically present but is “displaced;” the reader experiences the statement in isolation from its origin. Pertaining to this, Kristeva credits Gottlob Frege with the conclusion that “denotation would be understood as the subject’s ability to separate himself from the ecosystem into which he was fused, so that, as a result of this separation, he may designate it” (52).

The belief that a symbol may accurately convey objective truth on a one-to-one basis with the reality it represents, however, has led to “the archivistic, archeological, and necrophilic methods on which the scientific imperative was founded”—“the kind of activity [which] represses the process pervading the body and the subject” (14). This
process, she suggests consists of a repeating “practice—truth—practice sequence” (202) such as Mao describes in his essay On Practice; she quotes him:

If you want to know a certain thing or a certain class of things directly, you must personally participate in a practical struggle to change reality, to change that thing or class of things, for only thus can you come into contact with them as phenomena; only through personal struggle to change reality can you uncover the essence of that thing or class of things and comprehend them…. All genuine knowledge originates in direct experience. (Kristeva 200)

The sequence consists in acting within the external world, formulating knowledge of it, then again acting to re-form reality in response to one’s earlier findings.

Kristeva emphasizes that this sequence must repeat indefinitely, however. “The true is not the absolute positing of a transcendental ego; it is instead that part of it registered in a relation with the other” (219). As in the experience of the blind men with the elephant—each encountering a different portion of its body—one cannot know a whole unchanging truth. One’s actions may rupture one’s understanding of truth, and through modifying one’s interaction with the world in response to this, one changes oneself as well.

The moment of practice dissolves the subject’s compactness and self-presence. First, it puts the subject in contact with, and thus in a position to
negate, various objects and other subjects in his social milieu, with which the subject enters into contradiction, whether antagonistically or not. Although an externality, the contradiction within social relations de-centers and suspends the subject, and articulates him as a passageway, a non-place, where there is a struggle between conflicting tendencies, drives whose stases and thetic moments (the representamen) are as much rooted in affective relations (parental and love relations) as they are in class conflict. Rejection, de-centering the subject, sets his pulverization against natural structures and social relations, collides with them, rejects them, and is de-posited by them. At the moment of rejection (which presupposes the phase annihilating a former objectivity), a binding, symbolic, ideological, and thus positivizing component intervenes… in order to constitute, within language, the new object produced by the ‘subject’ in process/on trial through the process of rejection. The fundamental moment of practice is thus the heterogeneous contradiction that posits a subject put in practice/on trial by a natural or social outside that is not yet symbolized, a subject in conflict with previous theses (in other words, with those systems of representation that defer and delay the violence of rejection).
It is this very practice that includes heterogeneous contradiction as the mainspring of an infinite dialectical—material and signifying—movement. Practice is determined by the pulverization of the unity of consciousness by a nonsymbolized outside, on the basis of objective contradictions and, as such, it is the place where the signifying process is carried out. Out of these objective contradictions, drive rejection will bring forth a new object whose determinations exist objectively in material externality. (203) …It is this struggle that produces what consciousness will view as a moment of the ‘appearance’ of this ‘new’ object. At the place of this struggle, the ‘appearance’ does not exist; its ‘moment’ is ‘fiction,’ or even ‘laughter’ because all meaning is ephemeral there due to the pressure of rejection, which, for the subject, to repeat Freud again, is nothing other than the death drive or jouissance. (204)

When the circumstances of one’s social positions and the behaviors they demand conflict with one another, one must reject their collective truth value (they can’t all be right), and one is “de-centered”—one’s self-definition, which has been derived from these social relations, is called into question as one confronts their contradiction. No longer believing these opposed premises (or assumptions, internalizations), one “pulverizes” what one has rejected; however, a “positivising component intervenes” (Kristeva contextually implies drive function), by which the subject produces “within language” a “new object”—a
hypothesis to make sense of one’s self, one’s position, and one’s surroundings; one re-
synthesizes one’s worldview.

The relation of the individual-in-process through which appears this new object to
the act of laughter, of the death drive, and of jouissance bears additional elaboration prior
to explication. Kristeva quotes Sollers:

The cause external to the subject leads him to undergo, without being able
to master it, the effect of his internal determining cause, in other words, to
be consumed by it in consuming it. The subject becomes a game that
hides through and in his cause from his cause, the (external) precondition
laying bare the (internal) foundation. Bataille gives this compressed
operation a name: laughter. (Kristeva 204)

She then extrapolates:

In this moment of heterogeneous contradiction, the subject breaks through
his unifying enclosure and, through a leap (laughter? fiction?), passes into
the process of social change that moves through him. In other words, the
moment of practice objectifies the signifying process since it sets drive
rejection against material contradictions (class struggle, for example), but
at the same time it introduces these material contradictions into the
process of the subject. Heterogeneous contradictions here lies [sic]
between the signifying process and the objective social process: it is the excess of one by and through the other. (205)

Sollers’ describes with reference to Bataille the way in which laughter reveals (lays bare) failure (lack of mastery) by the individual (the foundation) to conform to the framework of expectations he encounters (the precondition) and which have imperfectly shaped him to themselves, yet the self remains “a game that hides” such that the ways in which the self diverges from social expectations are not necessarily clear to others. Kristeva describes as “this moment of heterogeneous contradiction” the instant of laughter; the subject laughs in rejection of the “unifying enclosure” of social expectation and in so doing ruptures it as he “passes into the process of social change.” Rejecting “material contradictions (class struggle, for example)” demonstrated by the newly perceived distinction between his experienced self and the cultural narrative he has learned, the individual actively conceives a new vision of himself—“the moment of practice objectifies the signifying process.”

Yet, the individual may continue to behave in apparent conformity to social norms despite this new recognition. In addition to “laughter” as a marker of the new object, Kristeva has sited “fiction.” For Kristeva, fiction illustrates non-conformity with the (non-fiction) outside world. Because this new “object” more truthfully describes the developing self, however, than does the individual’s outward behavior, Kristeva lauds the fiction as “ethical.”
“Ethics” should be understood here to mean the negativizing of narcissism within a *practice*; in other words, a practice is ethical when it dissolves those narcissistic fixations (ones that are narrowly confined to the subject) to which the signifying process succumbs in its socio-symbolic realization. Practice, such as we have defined it, positing and dissolving meaning and the unity of the subject, therefore encompasses the ethical. The text, in its signifying disposition and its signification, is a process assuming all positivity in order to negativize it and thereby make visible the *process* underlying it. It can thus be considered, precisely, as that which carries out the ethical imperative…. By stating scientific truths about the process of the subject (his discourse, his sexuality) and the tendencies of current historical processes, the text performs its ethical function only when it pulverizes, pluralizes, “musicates” these truths, which is to say, on the condition that it develop them to the point of laughter.

That is to say, laughter and fictionalization release one from self-conscious adherence to social norms. “The text… is a process assuming all positivity in order to negativize it,” usurping the authority of physical reality only to belie it and, in doing so, allowing for its revision. It is this revision of reality that reveals the ways in which both the author’s personal character and his social milieu (“current historical processes”) are developing. Fiction reveals the truth about the author in ways that his daily interactions with the
physical world around him cannot. Yet, Kristeva admonishes, to be truly ethical “the text” must “develop” even these revelations “to the point of laughter,” for it is laughter which rejects a former, no longer useful, truth and stimulates necessary growth.

For Kristeva, the impetus for this revision—the rejection of the self proffered through reflection by one’s circumstance (figuratively, the specular image)—arises out of an instinctual drive toward destruction. “Although it is destructive—a ‘death drive’—rejection is the very mechanism of reactivation, tension, life; aiming toward the equalization of tension, toward a state of inertia and death, it perpetuates tension and life” (150). The heterogeneity inherent to this tension “breaks through the barrier of repression and censorship” and “brings about… expenditure, semantico-syntactic anomaly, erotic excess, social protest, jouissance” (144).

Says Kristeva,

We shall call this heterogeneous practice signification to indicate, on the one hand, that biological urges are socially controlled, directed, and organized, producing an excess with regard to social apparatuses; and, on the other, that this instinctual operation becomes a practice—a transformation of natural and social resistances, limitations, and stagnation—if and only if it enters into the code of linguistic and social communication. (17)

If there exists a “discourse” which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers, an archive of structures, or the testimony of a withdrawn
body, and is, instead, the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction—productive violence, in short—it is “literature.” (16)

“We must therefore break out,” argues Kristeva, “of our interpersonal and intersocial experience if we are to gain access to what is repressed in the social mechanism: the generating of signification” (14)—the “unlimited and unbounded generating process, …unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language, …a structuring and de-structuring practice, a passage to the outer boundaries of the subject and society” (17)—a “literary practice” which is “inseparable” from the “political horizon.” It is through laughter and fiction that new visions of reality are stimulated and evoked, and without visionary narratives, society cannot adapt and progress.
Chapter 3

MISTRESS: PRESENT WITHOUT PROSPECT

As evidenced by the first appearance of the Portuguese, with their yellow and red flags, in the coastal city (62), The Expedition to the Baobab Tree is set around the turn of the 16th century; however, there is a more modern cast to the way the narrator uses the term “mistress” as, riding in a sedan chair carried by slaves, she says, “I rode on in perfect privilege, in the security of being preferred, in the status lent to me on this trip by virtue of being the select maidservant of one of the leaders. No, not the maidservant, not at all—the mistress” (68). In contrast, the wife of one of her prior masters the narrator never calls her mistress but “his shrew of a wife” (23) and “his nose-in-the-air wife” (39).

When the narrator claims the term, “I was really a mistress…. Enough to make you laugh” (111), she is not speaking of being a wife—of running a household in collaboration with its master—but of being a romantic hanger-on. “I was utterly dependant,” she says, “upon him to whom I was joined by deeds of sale as well as (I hoped to myself) by affection” (79). A mistress, by this definition, lacks independence and is both physically and emotionally bound to her master—“this man whom I embraced with my whole body and allowed to come into me time after time so as to be absolutely full of him, absolutely convulsively rich and fulfilled, seed-satisfied, making him, self-content, part of me, of me exclusively” (52). Not only are the master and
mistress connected, but they are “a self-sufficiency” (72) such that each contributes
wholeness to the other.

While the affection and fulfillment the narrator describes relate to her relationship
with her fifth and final master “the stranger” (and which are not consistently so idyllic as
they here seem), with each of her masters except “the youngest son” (who was “not
interested in the slightest in the slaves and slave-girls and other duties he had inherited”
[46-47]) the narrator is cast in a role conforming in some degree to that of the mistress.
Her experiences, though, demonstrate the incapacity of “mistress” to adequately define
her.

Shortly after her capture at the hands of slavers, the narrator is “broken in” by
“women who… taught [her] the game with men.” They teach her to “laugh lewdly” and
to “like a cat, snuggle up lithely or wriggle free.” These are the skills of the mistress—
are “gifts to make [her] attractive. At the time [she] thought them gifts” (15). The
perspective the narrator describes demonstrates her acceptance of the ethos into which
she is being inculcated. These new skills would work toward her advantage in fulfilling
the role in which she hopes to thrive, even as she doesn’t yet understand it. At the same
time, the retrospective reconsideration, “at the time I thought them gifts,” demonstrates
that she no longer subscribes to this perspective—perhaps that she does not any longer
consider it beneficial to be sexually attractive.
Nor is the narrator the only one to have realized the imperfection of fulfillment through the trappings of mistress-hood. She reminisces with a fellow slave about this discovery through the man who had been the first master of both of them:

Caught young, not yet circumcised, for just that reason sought and caught…. The man with whom she then went to live was very friendly. He was like a father…. He bought the very youngest at the market. He cracked them as one cracks young pods. He was considerate and permitted you to have your firstborn under his roof, then he sold you…. He broke the soft membrane like a blister. You were the spread-out one from whom blood flowed. You caught your breath, from pain and from what was surely ecstasy. (40-41)

As the narrator will come to be “utterly dependent” upon the stranger for provision not only of emotional satisfaction but also of sustenance, so to is she dependent upon her first master, with whom she lives “under his roof.” Yet, their coupling is not one of mutual emotional sufficiency. There may be “ecstasy,” but there is no fulfillment. Rather than inspiring the love of his young slave, the narrator’s master promises her a “headrest with… pretty snake-bean and mother-of-pearl intarsia… if [she is] good” (41), and soon enough, “to [her] owner [she] no longer existed” (42). While there is physical exchange in the narrator’s relationship with her first master, if a mutual emotional bond such as she
experiences in her relationship with the stranger is intrinsic to the definition of a mistress, then this falls woefully short of the mark.

Similarly, the narrator’s role in relation to her second master, “the spice merchant,” proves no more fulfilling. Whereas her first master had housed her under his roof, “in two low huts with collapsed roofs [the slaves of the spice merchant] lived… all together, not separated by sex” (23). She “regularly got a bite to eat” (39), but since her master would feed his slaves on “entrails” (22), she resorts to plotting “how to keep the liver aside for myself and mine, and how to pinch a scoopful of my master and his wife’s rice” (23). Although she maintains she “was cared for” while she “kept body and soul together by drudgery” (39), such meager provender is not comparable to that with which a mistress could expect to be provided; the narrator certainly is not the spice merchant’s mistress, yet there does exist a sexual dimension between the narrator and the spice merchant.

At night it was legs apart for the master on his sweaty skin-rug…. He was clumsy and rough…. With a stiff face… I let it happen. I could wait. I listened to the beat of the waves far beyond his groaning, and it lulled me. I was of water. I was a flowing into all kinds of forms…. My eyes smiled. My mouth was still. (23-24)

Here there is no sexual ecstasy; while the narrator has a unificatory experience which is in some senses similar to that which she has with the stranger, it is not with the spice
merchant that she feels this bond but with the fluid rocking of the ocean. No more personal is the spice merchant’s experience of sex with the narrator: to him, his female slaves “[are] all one woman, interchangeable, exchangeable” (24). Given the paltry provision of physical support and the lack of emotional involvement even during sexual intercourse, calling the narrator mistress to the spice merchant would be utterly laughable.

While still not without irony, the relationship between the narrator and her third master, her “benefactor,” is much more intimate—and intricate.

My benefactor smiled. He found [my vain, superficial display of lust] attractive. When I put my arms around him it was like protecting a child. Crazy, when he was the possessor, but it was so. He propped his head against my shoulder like, and with the innocence of, a child. And in the wink of an eye he changed and became wiser than I, scolded me, took over and initiated the caresses, and when we had intercourse he was both father and son and I both mother and trustful daughter. We knew everything together, completely, wishing for nothing more. (52)

As in her relationship with the stranger, in the narrator’s relationship with her benefactor the two form a self-sufficiency—“wishing for nothing more” than one another’s presence; there is both a physical and an emotional connection between them.
In this relationship, the narrator’s physical needs are amply fulfilled, for she speaks of her “easy indolent existence” as “a slave-girl in a generous household” (22); furthermore, life with her benefactor enriches her personal self-image.

“I hankered for nothing, I moped about nothing… for I was becoming possessed with myself…. Now for the first time I discovered beauty, my own and that of bunches of flowers, and of soapstone statuettes and jade clasps and porcelain glaze…. (28)

Besides developing this appreciation for beauty, the narrator’s sense of her personal value is enhanced through her benefactor’s “[finding] delight in [her]” (29) and “[displaying] a remarkable appreciation of [her] qualities” (50). Since she and her benefactor as lovers wish for nothing more than being with one another, “[her] life [shines]” (29).

Although the terminology is different, being “lover” to her benefactor definitively equates with being his “mistress;” the way in which the narrator’s relationship with him demonstrates the incapacity of the term mistress to fully define her diverges sharply from the sheer failure of her prior relationships to comport with the term's definition. The narrator will later discover, however, that refining oneself to a lover’s tastes may not bring a sustained sense of fulfillment. At this stage in her life’s journey, however, she cannot account for “the melancholy that sometimes [attacks her]” such that she “[grows] dulled with a stupid restlessness… within” herself:
What were my hands doing in front of my face? What could I have to feel sorrowful about? Now that the fondness of my newest owner, wealthy widower and foremost citizen, like cool moss coolly and softly protected me and I felt cosily hidden in his care, not just feeling safe but surmising the sparkle of a new time of life for me here in the looser relationship in which I now lived and in which my talents dared to unfold and there was little to restrict me—why did tears well up in my eyes and the city tremble in refracted colours? Why did my head sink on my chest? Why did I try to make myself as insignificant as possible, look for a dark corner, pretend absence when called? (29)

In her emotional outpourings, the narrator tells of contradictory feelings, first expressing complete satisfaction (“I hankered for nothing”) but then, on the very next page, distress (in rhetorical context, “What could I have to feel sorrowful about?”).

This tension is perhaps even more clear in the single phrase “I moped about nothing,” for although contextually it parallels “I hankered for nothing” and therefore suggests that she did not mope over anything, since clearly she does at times mope, the phrase should instead be taken to describe her as moping for no reason. It implies that there should be a reason for this behavior, and in doing so effectively devalues her sorrow. If the sorrow has no cause, it is unreasonable, and if reason is the cultural standard by which importance is determined, then anything unreasonable is also
unimportant. Seeing her emotions as being unreasonable could be at root of the narrator’s trying to make herself insignificant: if emotion is insignificant and the narrator is defined by emotionality, then the narrator should reasonably be insignificant.

Only later is a plausible reason for the narrator’s sorrow revealed to her. Her benefactor had made money first through “[ambushing] the slave-raiders and their convoys” (Stockenström 51), but eventually he had amassed a fortune large enough to pursue his hobby:

[He] was a connoisseur in a class of his own... [whose] aesthetic considerations had led [him] to seek perfection, a balance between beautiful externals and the intrinsic, and that had also led him to view his slaves as a collection of art objects, meticulously purchased with an eye to investment and sometimes disposed of individually at a profit after he had refined them through education. (50)

The narrator feels humiliated and retorts that “possession and loving are concepts which damn each other” (51), which re-contextualizes her earlier reference to her owner-benefactor as her “lover” (25) as well as her saying upon acclimation to his household that she is “becoming possessed with [herself]” (28). In the first case, her benefactor embodies two mutually damning concepts simultaneously, loving her and possessing her, which makes sense of the narrator’s ambivalent feelings—her feeling both “indolent” (22) and “restless” (23)—while in his household. In the second case, the narrator’s
Her growing into possession of herself is revealed not to reasonably coincide with growth in self-love: her discovering beauty for the first time (28) is as her benefactor's "looking at [her] as one views a pretty sunset or something like that" (28): recognizing in her not an essential human value but merely an aesthetic value (albeit pertaining to both her external and intrinsic qualities [50]).

Although the narrator's conformity to such an aesthetic eventually alienates her "bosom friend" (39)—the narrator, with "her precious manners" (48), being "confined within [her] affectations" (49)—even when she is later stranded alone in the veldt, the narrator resents the baboon's "vulgar hands-and-knees caricature" which shows "ridicule of [her] refinement, a demonstration that it is superfluous" (11). It is not this ethos of poise, then, which the narrator resents in her benefactor.

His objectification of people, on the other hand, does distress her: he purchases slaves "with an eye toward investment" and to be "disposed of... at a profit" (50).

Now I knew why I felt depressed. I had seen the procession... the signs of brokenness that rent me, crushed my spirit, made me stare despairingly, made me note their fate helplessly every time and keep my sympathies in check, force myself to joke about them so I could forget and repress.

...My fellows in fate arrived. (33-34)

Her sorrow, she suggests, is an impediment to her functioning within the cultural role into which her benefactor is inculcating her; to retain her status as "head slave-girl," as her
master's lover, she must “turn [her] back on the damned” (36). While during her time enslaved to the spice merchant she would filch from her master food for herself and her dependents, now that she lives in a generous household, she does not deign to help those who are less fortunate:

Fellow-slaves of my second owner, who had stayed behind in misery—I had no chance to grieve for you. It had happened that the hurricane elected me. I was in agreement with what was befalling me. … I could not get excited about anything in my past, and in fact was unwilling to talk about it. It was wasted time. (38)

As the narrator further internalizes the attitudes which her master and his house-guests expect of her, she becomes still less loving. Her excuse for neglecting the needy is no longer that she is busy and avidly exploring new opportunities for her personal growth; now she merely finds the poor bothersome, and she is unwilling to jeopardize her own modicum of status as head slave-girl.

To… the beggars in the city… I gave nothing. I possessed nothing and could give nothing. With distaste I looked away. They pursued me with the fury of the desperate and stretched out their hands to me and looked at me urgently; they were so obtrusive, so dirty and full of sores. I was not my master. (38)
Even as the narrator is humiliated by her benefactor’s emphasis of possession over love, in agreement with what was befalling her she adopts his values and conforms to his expectations. The mistress forsakes her love for others in order to retain her master’s love, protecting his wealth instead of distributing it to the needy, yet for him she never rises above the status of a prized possession.

This same outlook, in which love is supplanted by possession, the narrator’s fifth master—the stranger—amplifies to “human loss is comparable to capital loss” (51). From the narrator’s point of view, this perspective is offensive for its objectification of her, as is clear when she avers “I did not want to be as he and… all the others in my life… regarded me, …he who had just described me analytically and disposed of me like an object in a dispensation” (52), but her discomfiture does not arise merely in response to that. “I was different from what they all thought” (52), she says, and in “they all” she includes her “earliest memories of huts and mother and security… memories of the lascivious man who bought [her] to deflower [her], and the spice merchant whose labours [she] had to endure grinding [her] teeth,” her benefactor, the stranger (51), “all the women in [her] life” (52), and in fact she says she “was… utterly different from what anyone might think” (52). This would seem to preclude accurate analysis; nevertheless, the significance of the narrator’s complaint is that she exceeds the parameters of the social categories that are available to her. She is indefinable.
Her realization of this, however, comes after her attempted conformity to the mistress paradigm leaves her unfulfilled. While as a slave to the spice merchant the narrator “wanted to go still further…[than] the master’s eye can see” (44); of the time after the death of the narrator’s benefactor’s youngest son (who inherits her upon the death of his father), when she has sought out the stranger with whom she has fallen in love (21) and has asked him to buy her (59), the narrator says—

I had no choice but to follow him, for I was not a searcher, I was one driven from circumstance to circumstance, and whoever bought me had to keep me, and this time would keep me. Sometimes it was pleasantly advantageous and easy to be property. I was simply someone together with someone else. (46)

Indoctrinated into the beliefs of the community to which she has been abducted, the narrator surrenders her desire for independence in favor of enslavement to love—the role of the mistress: “Frivolous, perhaps, if I had been a woman who could have decided her own fate, but surely a permissible escape for the owned class to which I belonged” (21).

Yet while the narrator undermines the reader’s attribution of agency to her through the claim “I was not a searcher, I was one driven,” the clause “permissible escape” calls into question her lack of agency, for she actively pursues love as a form of escape. Too, the ambiguity of her argument concerning frivolity and permissibility exceeds the logic to which it appears to conform. Because she is owned, she argues, she
cannot decide her own fate and is careful to act within the parameters of what is permissible; therefore, she says, her falling in love is not frivolous, implying that frivolity is not afforded to a slave. Because that which is not frivolous can only be purposeful, though, the narrator’s falling in love—for the purpose of escape—further validates the agency her words deny.

Ultimately, the narrator admits her own agency, reflecting as she recounts her experiences, “I searched and opened a way and found. Found, I say. Terrifying” (10). The way she finds is dream: “I laugh to myself. And keep quiet too, perhaps just keep quiet so as to dream outward, for the seventh sense is sleep. … Then only do I live, I tell myself” (7). She lives through dreaming herself unbound from traditional social roles, which shall be further explicated presently, but for the time being let it suffice to say that prior to this discovery, during her travel with the stranger, the narrator conforms as fully as she is able to the image of the mistress.

Her pursuing the love of and her purchase by the stranger demonstrate a shrinking from her own agency, for rather than pursuing growth through terrifying change, such as fleeing the city on her own to join the “colony of deserters [in the swamp]… [who] survived unbearable heat and loneliness to die there eventually as free people” (24), the narrator seeks the comfort of defined status. “Only those who have, have security as well,” she observes (20), betraying her desire for possession such as she will later conclude dams the love she professes.
The stranger pampers the narrator, allowing her to ride in a sedan chair alongside his own and that of his business-partner, her benefactor’s eldest son; even after the two men later opt to spare their slaves the burden of carrying them, the narrator is allowed to retain her conveyance. As she is carried past a group of “zealous women workers” building a town (67), she explains,

Like a real lady, I sat and watched the multitude labouring in the scorching sun, and made remarks and observations in a light, contented mood, I felt so good. Never before had life been so pleasant. … I felt myself to be a particularly elevated, untouchable temporary spectator, always on the move, and thought out something else pithy to utter from my seat. Perhaps they are . . . I wanted to say slave-women. I choked the word down. … I rode on in the security of being preferred…. I had the freedom of finding myself in strange parts with a man on whom I could have doted and a crowd of servants…. And no chance of escaping. … Foolish even to want to make contact with these women when no sure welcome was guaranteed to me and help would not necessarily be offered. So I swung on haughtily but eager-eyed. (68)

Even with the security she has sought, with the love of him with whom she forms “a self-sufficiency” (72), she still cannot bring herself to dote on her lover as a mistress should, yet she is afraid to “throw [herself] on the mercy of the inhospitable” (68). She
has yearned for the security that being the stranger’s mistress would bring, yet she finds that position unfulfilling.

Ironically, it is only after setting out with the stranger into “strange parts” that the narrator achieves a sense of freedom. Before embarking on the journey, she sides with the “wide-awake traders” who are “skeptical about… the dream of the unknown” (46), yet it is the stranger’s “rebellious streak” (60) that brings about the narrator's emancipation. They “departed for the frontiers of the spirit. Invertebrates about to change homes” (60) to become “as… dream-beings in a transition to [they] knew not what” (80), and although she “never wished it on him” (64), only upon the stranger’s death does the narrator fully surpass her limiting role as his mistress—in which she has been “utterly dependent like a parasite” (79)—and to develop her own independence.
Chapter 4

MOTHER: UNFATHOMABLE, AFTER ALL

Not long after the narrator begins in the house of her first master to learn the role of the mistress, she becomes pregnant and is deposed to motherhood; “already there was another little thing in my place” she complains (Stockenström 42). Still a child herself, the narrator “played at swelling” (41) until in childbirth she “called… back to the place of [her own] birth” (42).

While the village in which the narrator was born is not named, circumstances suggest she would have been of a culture which today is called Shona, as Stephen Gray alludes (56). This category is problematic, though, as it arose first among Rhodesian linguists of the British Empire in the 20th century and lumps together speakers of “some fifty-two dialects” according to Thomas Huffman in Snakes and Crocodiles: Power and Symbolism in Ancient Zimbabwe (3). Yet in Southern Africa there are certain parallels among cultures even transcending the Shona classification, suggests Penny S. Bernard (in her 2003 study “Ecological Implications of Water Spirit Beliefs in Southern Africa: The Need to Protect Knowledge, Nature, and Resource Rights”). “What is remarkable… are the similarities in the myths and the core symbols” (149).

According to the 1982 Symbols of Life: an Analysis of the Consciousness of the Karanga(SOL)—by Herbert Aschwanden in collaboration with the Karanga Nurses of the Musiso Hospital at Zaka, Zimbabwe, published originally as Symbole des
Lebens (1976) and translated into English by Ursula Cooper—the two most important symbols of the Karanga people, who are the most numerous among the “Shona-speaking groups” (xiii), are fertility and blood (22). “The Karanga says: ‘My blood is all my ancestors.’… In his blood, the Karanga experiences a direct link with the ancestral spirits” (23), and one undertaking of these spirits is to protect fertility (24).

The narrator of The Expedition to the Baobab Tree’s “scream back to the place of [her] birth” (Stockenström 42) recollects the context of her former self, whom—through her abduction and subsequent inculcation into the “mistress” role—she has largely forgotten; she says, “On the many paths of my memory there arise threatening figures that block every backward glance” (10). Yet (if one allows her upbringing would have been sufficiently similar to that of the Karanga), “When the uterus, ‘at the command of the ancestral spirits’, opens the way into the world, the mind of the baby… [already] knows its social position, it knows its parents and the tribe into which it has been born… [for] at the moment of conception, the parents introduced themselves to the baby” (SOL 33). The narrator’s giving birth to a child in part fulfils the role with which her parents inculcated her before her own birth, fertility being of prime social importance; thereby childbirth reconnects her in some degree with her ancestral values.

This hypothesis obliquely resonates with existing analysis of Stockenström’s text. Gray says Stockenström’s reader is “invited to be a child again… and to listen to the maternal voice of a past which can always become accessible again” (57); however,
Viljoen interpolates from Gray’s statement the argument that “the narrating voice heard in this novel” is “monologic,” which she refutes, describing the narrative voice as “complex, stratified, and diverse… [and] a fragmented rather than a comforting one” (164). In fact, Gray seems to be arguing not that the narrator embodies a maternal voice but that the reader wonders along with the narrator about the histories behind the artifacts she discovers—beads, potsherds, “the relics of a former civilization beneath her baobab abode” (Gray 57)—and considers the historical “maternal voice” they represent.

Certainly, as Viljoen observes, the richness of the narrative arises out of “identity constructed at the intersection of factors like place, language, class and gender” (Viljoen 164) rather than the narrator’s characterization being limited to that of an archetypal mother. Nevertheless, the narrator’s “call… to the place of [her] birth” (Stockenström 42) does, as Grey argues, summon up “the maternal voice of a past” (Gray 57).

Despite the “comforting” unity Viljoen derisively ascribes to this voice of history, it’s recollection cannot bring comfort to the narrator. In the Karanga ethos, the woman is viewed as a “field” in which the father sows his seed—“The child’s blood is the father’s blood, the mother contributes nothing” (SOL 6). The narrator’s female ancestral spirits have helped to protect the fertility of her uterus (SOL 80, 143), but since she is unmarried, her child “has received no totem [which would be spoken by husband and wife during lovemaking to introduce the child to its blood ancestry] at the moment of begetting… [and lacking a totem] is a serious misfortune which might lead to the child’s
early death” (SOL 3-4). Even as the narrator experiences delivery as a reconnection with her own birth and implicitly also with the ancestors who “start the labor pains” (262), this connection can bring only ominous censure, which may well be why “no one… would tell [her] to whom she called” (Stockenström 42). Without conscious awareness of her ancestors’ involvement, the narrator cannot hear their response, and so “there [in the place of her own birth] it [her call] echoes” (42).

Even though the narrator has been separated from her family at a young age, the voice of Shona culture does resonate through the text as the narrator’s experiences often have symbolic meaning. For the Karanga, motherhood is closely connected with the symbol of water, which is often used in their stories to represent the amniotic fluid in the womb (e.g. “The Creation of Man” in Aschwanden’s Karanga Mythology, [KM] 28), while the uterus itself is declared to be “a jar” (SOL 190)—the thematic implications of which in The Expedition to the Baobab Tree will presently be considered. Since water relates to motherhood, however, when Stockenström’s narrator speaks of her “water spirit” (Stockenström 96 and elsewhere), she evokes the ideal of maternal fertility. At the same time, fertility is not an individual quality but represents a family line, the ancestral spirits who help in the creation of children (SOL 216), while from the breath of the Creator-God Mwari originates the soul that joins to the body at one’s conception (SOL 4). “The word Mwari is a contraction of mu – hari, i.e. to be in the jar…. In the same way as the uterus (jar) of the woman is a giver of life so God himself is too, and in the jar
of the woman… there is the amniotic fluid where the embryo (also called Mwari) lives” (KM 206); “God (Mwari) is water” (20), and “Mwari is the God of fertility” (206). Although the man and the ancestors create the child’s body, it is the spirit of God within the woman which constitutes its soul.

Not only does motherhood imbue the Shona woman with divine fertility, but it is through motherhood that she gains a sense of self: “the first born child… gives his parents their identity label” according to Anita Jacobson-Widding, writing with reference to the Manyika Shona in “Individual Identity in African Storytelling” (1993):

Nobody is ever addressed by his personal name. A term denoting a kinship role is used instead. Even the small child is addressed by reference to his or her future role in the patrilineage, i.e. baba (father) for the little boy and tete (paternal aunt) for the little girl. It is only when the child is rebuked, or ordered about, that he may hear his own personal name. As he grows up, he may be addressed by personal name by his peers, but once he (or she) gets married, the term of address will refer to his (or her) role as father (or mother): Baba wa Nicholas (Nicholas’ father), or Mai wa Nicholas (Nicholas’ mother). (8)

This pattern of Shona address adds a dimension to the narrator’s lacking a name throughout the text; she presumably cannot recall her given name, but neither is she called according to her “future role” in the manner Jacobson-Widding describes. In fact,
Aschwanden suggests another dimension to modes of address that Jacobson-Widding does not: “A girl… receives the name of a dead ancestress” (SOL 39); “If, for example, a man calls his second daughter after his late mother, then the child is always addressed as grandmother (*mbuya*). The eldest daughter and her younger and elder brothers treat her as if she were really the *mbuya*. Later, in case of difficulties or disagreements, one always approaches the *mbuya* first for she can give good advice. A deceased woman is, indeed, back among the living” (297). Cutting the narrator off from her children and her ancestry cuts her off from her personal identity.

It is not merely to the enjoyment of grandchildren that the nameless narrator refers when she says, “Suddenly I saw: here in this city I would never become a grandmother…. For me there was no continuation, no links backwards or forwards” (Stockenström 55). The links she invokes represent not just the fecundity of the grandmother’s own offspring (links forward) but also that of her ancestors whose spirit she shares (links backward) and which will carry on into the afterlife. To the Karanga, “a person is that which one day will become a *mudzimu*” (SOL 24), an ancestral spirit. “A person reaches his greatest potential only as an ancestral spirit,” and “only when [one] leaves behind children of [one’s] own can [one] become an ancestral spirit” (SOL 24); “‘A child,’ the Karanga says, ‘is your real name, the name by which the world will know you – without a child, you remain unknown’” (SOL 65). It is even said that “a childless
woman is regarded as a ‘dead’ woman,” according to Herbert Aschwanden’s 1987 *Symbols of Death* [SOD], page 162.

Although the narrator's call back to the place of her birth goes unanswered and she has lost connection with her own ancestry, she initially does her best to fulfill the mother's role. “I was the sweetest little mother” she says (Stockenström 41), “My baby… had only to say *ee* and I fed him” (42). It may seem strange to western readers that there is a strong communal aspect to the narrator's experience of child-rearing; the narrator and her “bosom friend” she says “made no distinction between hers and mine…. A child was a child to us” (39). This is, however, much the same situation as one finds in Karanga society where “a child has many parents…. For instance, he calls all his father’s brothers ‘father’” (SOL 61).

Nevertheless, the idea that the narrator could find fulfillment in motherhood under these circumstances is ridiculous: “I functioned as a mother till my children were as high as my hip, then I lost all say over them. They disappeared from my life” (55). She hopes “if [she] bumped into them somewhere [to] be able to recognize them” (56); asks, “Would I immediately feel a glow of recognition course through me, and yearn to press him to me, meticulous identification having been rendered unnecessary by a bittersweet knowledge within me, a source of certainty warmer than the sun, like mothers are supposed to have? Mothers being unfathomable, after all” (56); but then concludes, “I had to accept that grown children were what I lacked. For that reason I felt relieved that I
had not yet fallen pregnant again” (58). The narrator recognizes that the happy reunion she imagines will never take place because the ideal of motherhood as it is “supposed to” be is too fantastic to be real.

While an American reader is likely to be fully aware of the “mothers' instinct” concept which Stockenström's narrator decries, one is unlikely to recognize the implications of the question she asks when she and her young son are in the slave market sold separately from one another: “what was I if I was no longer my child?” (Stockenström 43). Because it is through one's children that one becomes mudzimu, and only through becoming mudzimuthat one is considered to have become a real person, “…when a father or mother dies, one cannot really say munhawakafa(the person is dead) because, if someone continues to exist in his or her descendants, he or she is mupenyu, i.e. alive. Of a child one may say wakafa(it is dead) for, though it has a soul, a child does not live on in what its fertility would eventually have made it: a real person. The soul lives, but the ego – that part of a real person – did not find fulfillment” (SOL 315).

While it would not be a foregone conclusion in The Expedition to the Baobab Tree that the narrator’s child would precede her in death, according to Solomon Murungu of Zambuku Projects cultural education resources, “when a grown person dies in the Shona culture, it is believed that his spirit wanders about. It is a homeless spirit. Only until the surviving relatives of the deceased ‘welcome back’ his or her spirit does it become a legitimate ancestral or family spirit” (“Death and Dying in Shona Culture”).
Just as Stockenström’s narrator has not performed rites to welcome her parents back as vadzimu [plural of mudzimu], neither would her son do so upon her own death. Therefore, the narrator will not after her death be mudzimu but will remain a wandering, homeless spirit.
Chapter 5

WITCH: FALL UPON THE WEAK AND EAT THEM UP

Unstated in the narrator’s closing claim, “I was really a mistress and mother and goddess. Enough to make you laugh” (Stockenström 111) is the possibility that she could also be viewed as having been a witch. There is a close relationship between the mutually exclusive roles of “mother” and “witch” in the Karanga tradition out of which the narrator has come and according to which her motherhood has been evaluated. That being the case, neglecting to evaluate the narrator’s adherence to the “witch” role would allow that she be assumed a witch, and it would follow that since this is a recognized role in Karanga society, even though they are typically cast out and beaten, her being such would not in fact “disturb the logic that dominated the social order” (Kristeva 83). Demonstrating, then, that Stockenström’s narrator does make a mockery of those who would confine her to traditionally recognized roles requires establishing that her performance as a witch is laughable.

In considering the two roles “mother” and “witch,” Aschwanden—citing V. W. Turner, 1969—sees the later as “anti-structure” to the former:

The existing (positive) structure is not simply negated or destroyed… but is newly constructed, or reconstructed, in such a way that the original structure is replaced by a symbolism characterized by negative values, in
which the original (positive) structure can still be clearly recognized because it is the basis of the antistructure. (Symbols of Death 140)

Just as during pregnancy a mother carries alien blood (that of the father, which is alien to her own ancestral blood) within her, a witch mixes blood through eating victims (SOD 154). Too, while a mother “becomes a genuine ancestor only through [her] children, so the witches’ spirit becomes a really dreaded shave-spirit only through its chidhoma” (141), a child whom the witch transforms into an animal (135) such as a crocodile (134).

Although in the normal, positive structure of motherhood, children are essential to one’s own pleasant afterlife, the narrator's disillusionment in motherhood is so great that she takes an active role in preventing it: “When I was expecting my third, I visited an abortionist. My friend stopped me. Life is cheating me, life is poison honey, I complained tiredly. She threw away the seductively-scented violet-tree roots I had bought” (Stockenström 44). This act would brand the narrator as a witch. Not only is it said that “often women who have lost all or many of their children” are witches (SOD 156), even more specifically—

The Karanga’s rule is [this]: every medicine which ‘sheds blood’ is uroyi[witchcraft]… and… [one] who acquires medicines (by whatever means) for the purpose of killing is always classed as muroyi [practitioner of witchcraft]…. For… when he starts by using medicines… he must have been thinking beforehand about how they are to be obtained and
administered. Anybody who ‘studies hungrily how to acquire and use medicines for killing’ is muroyi already. (163)

Even though the narrator is thwarted in her plan to abort her baby, her intent to do would itself be seen as witchcraft. “Whoever does not wish to build a family, or even destroys it, is a witch” (181).

The fact that the narrator has also borne “a stillbirth strangled by the navel cord” (105) would also point to her witchcraft. In Karanga tradition, if “the child does not want to leave its mother’s body through a passage which has been sullied by sin” (SOL 280), and “the woman who, while giving birth, does not confess her adultery and so ‘kills’ the baby that does not want to be born… she will be called a witch” (SOD 121). One might argue that since the narrator had not been married, this circumstance could not apply to her; however, for the Karanga, adultery is not primarily a matter of marital fidelity but of “alien blood [being] mixed in the… uterus” (187). “The mixing of different blood always invites disaster… [for the] particular world of vadzimu[ancestral spirits] in the blood must be respected” (SOL 37), and these “ancestors… through the child, can intervene and effect the progress of birth” (180). We have no evidence that Stockenström’s narrator while pregnant had relations with someone of blood different from that of the child’s father, but during the narrator’s intercourse with her second master, proper rituals were not performed to defend against the danger brought about through mixing blood and, in fact, says Aschwanden, not just adultery but “any other
offense can also be the cause of the delay for, the Karanga say, the child wants to be born into a world where it can be as happy as it is in the one it must leave.”

Even though Stockenström’s narrator describes her stillbirth not as a death but says “my baby who had chosen darkness over the light of life. It was an ecstasy of never being. It was the only true victory: neither death nor life had meaning. It was equilibrium. It was the perfection of non-being” (105), it would still be suspected that the ancestor’s influence led the child to resist being born due to some sin its mother had committed and her failure to confess such would clearly indicate she is a witch.

These are not the only aspects in which Stockenström’s text supports the proposition that the narrator is a witch. She stands naked before the little people (Stockenström 100), and “witches go about naked” (SOD 125). However, the narrator describes choosing nudity as a means to attract attention and displaying her body “before doubt and hesitation overcame [her]” (Stockenström 100), while “A witch possessed by a spirit starts immediately to take off her clothes” (SOD 125), so the narrator’s hesitant manner of nudity disrupts the Karanga cultural expectation of nudity for a witch.

Another event, perhaps the primary one, which could be grounds for the narrator to be identified as a witch is that her final master, the stranger, is killed by a crocodile (63), and the crocodile, as previously mentioned, may be a chidhoma or child of the witch, serving her in her murderous ends (SOD 144). The narrator says that she “never wished [death] on [the stranger]” (Stockenström 64), but a novice witch “is only
conscious of the evil [she performs] when the *shave* [alien spirit] possesses her,” and when the spirit leaves her, she has no recollection of it;

she can even go out at night without knowing it the next day [sic]. It will seem to her like a dream. But the converse is also possible, and more frequent: as a novice she dreams of such nightly excursions, and those dreams serve to induct her into witchcraft. These dream-excursions are merely a psychical reality, but one night the dream becomes a physical reality: she goes out as a person of flesh and blood, still experiencing it as a dream and without knowing that the dream has become a new reality.

(SOD 128)

Certainly the narrator’s description of her dream experiences could be seen to describe such a phenomenon. She desires “to dream outward, for the seventh sense is sleep” (Stockenström 7), and “only when [she is] asleep [does she] know fully who [she is]” (12).

There is, too, an extent to which the narrator’s perspective coincides with what one would expect a witch to dream of. Aschwanden relates dreams shared by a woman who feared she was becoming a witch, “I eat flesh from a child’s head; I hold the severed leg of a child; a snake drops from my hip” (SOD 119), and Stockenström’s narrator rails, Hateful one. You are loathing like me. Come and kindle your ill in me. I am evil and dangerous. I am dried-out ape dugs and fresh slippery ox eye
and peeled-off human skin and the venom of the deadly sea-slug with the sucker mouth. I am hatred and hatred’s mask. I am deformed. There is a snake in my blood. I drink my own blood. I kick in my swoon. I flounder. (Stockenström 43)

However, this tirade takes place while the narrator is awake and is directed at the individual buying her in the slave market and separating her from her son—the definition of her life as a mother. The actual dreams the narrator relates—“I am of a self-sufficient crystalinity, transmuted into pure bliss” (101)—are nothing like the “necrophile” dreams spoken of by the woman who fears becoming a witch (SOD 119). Rather, these transcendental dreams violate the expectation of a witch’s somnolence.

In fact the only overt reference to witchcraft in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* originates not with the narrator, but with the stranger, who tells the following “pretty stories”—

At night I call all my familiar spirits…. Poor inhabitants of the villages along our route, they don’t know what hits them. They have no knowledge of wizards who make an appearance now here now there and make their familiars violate their graves…. I send my familiars into the kraals to the graves of the chieftains… and the great famine comes to all the regions through which we travel. The storage baskets are emptied. The livestock die. People look at one another with eyes red as fire, with
half-eyes, with squint-eyes, and fall upon the weak and eat them up. They cut off their lips and fingertips and let them bleed to death in pots of water, cook them and eat them up, the tastiest bits for the strongest, the offal and the gravy for what children remain. (72-73)

Indeed, cannibalism is the hallmark of the witch’s spirit (SOD 125 and elsewhere). One might consider that the stranger is introducing the narrator to witchcraft.

The narrator gives no response to this, however, such that the stranger assumes her disquietude and mumblingly asks her forgiveness (73), going on to suggest he is trying to “be ridiculous with dignity” (74), implying that he is only using the cultural story of being a witch as a means to give meaning to his destructive behavior, which has led to their being stranded in the veld. Were the narrator a witch, she should react positively to the stranger’s stories in accordance with Aschwanden’s example (SOD 214-15) wherein Tendai finds beautiful an owl, which in Karanga culture is feared as a witch’s familiar. Since the narrator does not favorably respond to the stranger’s “pretty stories” (Stockenström 73), it is implausible she is a witch.

Indeed, in view of the stranger’s voracity, the narrator finds it “terribly funny when other-consuming man is himself eaten” – that the stranger has “Come to his end in the belly of a reptile” (Stockenström 63). Not only may the crocodile be, as mentioned earlier, the witch’s child, but it is also “the phallic symbol of the strange man” (KM 72), so when the stranger is eaten by the crocodile, he is symbolically destroyed by his own
lust even as he in truth expires as a result of seeking “big easy profits” (Stockenström 76). The crocodile can also be interpreted in the Karanga story “The girl and the crocodile” (71) as “the witchcraft the girl had begun to turn to” (72), so not only is the stranger swallowed by his own lust, but that lust—which in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is not sexual but is pursuit of personal enrichment—that selfish pursuit of gain is equated with witchcraft. “I am avaricious out of an eagerness to know” (102), he has said, and, “I wish I could travel to the outer limit of the world. I am so greedy” (103). The stranger has fought in war, which he considers “the supreme game of profit” (103). “I rob money, I don’t rob people…. I rob before I am robbed” (50-51) he apologizes, but then reveals he sees “human loss is comparable to capital loss” (51).

When faced with the stranger’s ethos of exploration and consumption, “the all-investigating consciousness that could explain nothing” (18), the narrator faults his acquisitiveness, averring that “Possession and loving are concepts that damn each other” (51). This is in contrast to the view a witch holds, for witches lack “normal human feelings of love, patience and pity” (SOD 156). Too, although the narrator may “imagine bloody wars of extermination. Droughts. An epidemic” (Stockenström 17), when she is faced with “the slaughter” of the little people by “Others” (106), she does not feast upon the corpses although “witches love human flesh” (SOD 151); while “a witch is primarily eager to kill and destroy because this gives her pleasure” (188), Stockenström’s narrator does “not know how to assimilate the horror” she feels (Stockenström 106). Even though
she narrator has lost multiple children and has even tried to abort one of her pregnancies, considering her a witch would be laughable since she is not cannibalistic and even takes issue with enriching oneself at others’ expense.
Chapter 6

GODDESS AND HUMAN: IN GODLY IMPOTENCE... A HUMAN BEING AND POWERFUL

These have been considered and found laughable: the narrator’s adherence to the role of “mistress” within the framework of modern culture as represented in the text by the coastal trade city, and her adherence to the roles of “mother” and “witch” from the perspective of the Karanga tribe of Shona people as representing the culture into which the narrator was born. Insofar as in each of these cases the narrator’s achieving fulfillment within the role under consideration is at best problematic, each of the roles is ridiculous. Through deploying these symbols ironically, The Expedition to the Baobab Tree checks the ability of their respective cultures to truly circumscribe the character of its narrator and, in so doing, highlights the need for new feminine paradigms.

The final of the paradigms the narrator claims—only to undermine—is this: “I was really a... goddess. Enough to make you laugh” (111). In the earlier-considered cases, laughter arises out of the narrator’s inability to find lasting satisfaction, no matter how hard she tries, in the roles in which she is confined; however, in the case of the “goddess,” laughter arises instead both out of irony inherent in the role as she considers it has been applied to her and also through ambiguities she creates among various religious standards. Since it is only in closing that the narrator uses the term “goddess,” contextualizing her meaning is entirely retrospective. Her ridiculous manifestation of divinity ties in with her being “looked upon as the spirit of a tree” (Stockenström 27): the
little people, “for whom [she existed] only as an apparition” (96), “kept [her] apart” (98), not allowing her to be human (101) even as they brought her offerings, while her synthesis of Shona spiritual roles disturbs the logic by which ancient trees are associated with ancestral potency and reinforces the stranger’s argument that one should “let… alone… the moral lessons to be learned from the experiences of those who elevate their tribal history to a religion” (18).

While the basis of theistic religions is the potency of deity—parishioners would hardly congregate beneath a god whom they believed powerless—the narrator equates the cultural role of “goddess,” which she sporadically sees the little people as having imposed upon her, as lacking power: she says after the “little people” are slaughtered, “In godly impotence I walked among your corpses and achieved nothing” (109). Although the role emphasizes her weakness, it conversely entails an expectation of power: she “should have been able to offer a way out” (109), a way to save the little people from the attacking others. At the same time the narrator acknowledges this contradiction in her internalized conceptualization of deity, she complains that she has “not [been] allowed to be human” (101) but claims her humanity as powerful in its own right: “I am… a human being and powerful (14).

The narrator’s view of both deity and humanity is here elaborated: “A supreme being I am in my grey tree-skin” she says;
When I appear in the opening I stand proudly. Afterwards I suspect that I pose in the easily cultivated attitude of apparently relaxed expectation that I learned to adopt before my owners, mindful of the advantage of making an impression and at the same time beneath the surface brimming with conceit because I held this tiny scrap of power. (14)

Here she equates herself as “supreme being” with her experience as a slave who gains “a tiny scrap of power” through “making an impression.” There is an extent to which this correlates with the biblical view of Christ as expressed in the book of Phillipians, and while it may be open to dispute whether in 16th century southern Africa the narrator would have encountered the bible (through Arabic traders, her owners in the port city), given that The Expedition to the Baobab Tree was originally written Die kremetartekspedisie in Afrikaans for an audience of the Calvinist tradition, the parallel is pertinent—“Christ Jesus… being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant…. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place” (2:5b-7a, 9a); however, Stockenström’s narrator seems to be claiming not the strength of godhood revealed through weak humanity but rather independent humanity transcending servile divinity. A “goddess” may be proud of her ability to embody this cultural ideal but remains powerless to achieve self-actualization outside its constraints.
Whereas the impression Christ makes on the external person of God the father brings about his transcendent power, the narrator’s owners—who from outside her impose a vision of her being—make posing necessary, and only when they are no more is she able to seize substantial power for herself:

I can say: this is mine. I can say: this is I. These are my footprints. These are the ashes of my fireplace. These are my grinding-stones. These are my beads. My sherds... Imperiously I now stand and gaze out over the veld, and every time I step outside the world belongs to me. Every time I step out from the protecting interior of the tree I am once again a human being and powerful. (14)

The narrator describes herself as “a human being and powerful” while Christ, it is said, “made himself nothing... being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7). The narrator thus inverts Christian doctrine of god as powerful and humanity as weak. From a Christian perspective, as well as from that of the little people, she imagines, her claims are outlandish—ridiculous.

The above passage of The Expedition to the Baobab Tree not only inverts Christian ideals of deity, but it also contradicts Shona religious symbols: ashes, grinding-stones, beads, sherds, and the tree. Their deployment in this context shows the narrator’s ability to grow despite being in a situation which, to the Karanga, is death of one’s spirit—having no children to perform rituals for one’s post-mortem return as an ancestor.
“The ashes are a symbolic sign of that which is created by love, i.e. a child, and also the ‘waste’ of sexual intercourse, i.e. the backflow of semen from the vagina. …Fire, as a symbolical representative of God, is also an expression of the love between man and life” (SoL 209). However, the narrator has no husband nor even any longer a lover, and the children she has borne have been taken from her. It is not the fire she claims, but the ashes—the waste of love. This “svina” or “dirt” (223) symbolizes contact with alien blood and makes one unclean (225). The narrator’s sexual experiences have been outside the sanctity of godly marriage, and the ashes represent as fruitless her defilement.

The “grinding stones” too allude to the narrator’s unfulfilled sexuality.

Pounding a mortar, to the Karanga, is a sign of sexual intercourse. …The empty mortar symbolizes the dry vagina of the woman which can cause paraphimosis (tying off the man’s glans penis because the foreskin is too tight). As paraphimoses mutilate the penis and make a man sterile, the Karanga regard him as having been killed: he is dead to his lineage because he can beget no more children. It is part of their religious dogma that a man must still have his potency when he dies, otherwise he can neither pass on his fertility to his children nor help them maintain it. (SoL 46)

“The witch also enacts symbolical intercourse: by pounding an empty mortar, for example, she can make her husband sterile” (SoD 180). Not only does the narrator lack
children, she here symbolically references a lack of fertility. Whereas ordinarily, however, in grinding one may associate the mortar with the woman and the pestle with the man, the narrator has neither mortar nor pestle but instead two “stones” which are not distinctive with reference to sexual roles. This represents that the narrator has no sexual counterpart – no spouse, and also reinforces the idea of sterility which the ashes raise through symbolic reference to absent offspring.

The textual proximity of the ashes with the grinding stones could also be seen as foreshadowing the narrator’s impending death: “When someone dies, the Karanga pour ashes into a mortar and grind them with a pestle... [which] refers to the new life of the deceased. Once he was begotten by the light of a fire [God, love]—and fire produces ashes. Now that he is gone, he is carried away by death like the ashes by the wind” (SoL 207). When taken independently, the ashes and the grinding stones represent respectively the waste of love and sterility, but taken together they represent rebirth through death; however, since the narrator has no offspring, the Karanga would not view her death as a rebirth into new status as an ancestor.

There are other symbolic rebirths in Karanga culture, one of which relates to beads—in some senses similar to those the narrator mentions—given to a bride by her new husband. “After the wedding-night, the husband has to give his wife a present... a bag... filled with glass beads which she [would use] to make the mukanda-belt.... The bag and the beads are symbols of the husband’s scrotum and seeds” (SoL 183). “[The
mukanda’s sole purpose is to adorn the woman’s body and enhance her enjoyment of sexual intercourse. [It] may only be worn by a married woman, it symbolizes her duties as wife” (180). The bride’s receipt of the mukanda can be seen to represent rebirth because it is a form of mutimwe (180), and a mutimweis “[knotted] around the baby’s loins… to safeguard the new-born child’s fertility” (33). For the female, it represents her oviducts as well as her consanguinity with her ancestral tribe (33).

Stockenstöm’s narrator of course does not have enough beads to assemble a mukanda, she has not received them from a husband, and they were not in a bag:

I came upon a flattened patch—it looked flattened to me—and stumbled and sprawled and gasped for breath. I turned around. My heart beat down to my fingertips. The puffs of breath from my nostrils blew against quivering blades of dry grass.

Thus I lay for a long while with the resignation of a food scavenger to whom hunger is something familiar that can wait to be stilled. Then I saw something shining, little beads of light between my eyelashes shone green and black, the light turned to solid beads when with the tip of my finger I burrowed between the blades of grass and touched them. Then I sat up and scratched the beads out of the dust and the dry roots. They lay in my palm, two black and one green. I carried the useless discovery to the tree.
They were as small as pollen. I examined them. I arranged them in the limited number of patterns that their number and colours allowed. I recognized them.

The images in this passage where she discovers the beads—flattened grass, sprawling and gasping, and heavy heartbeat and breathing—have undeniable sexual connotations, and while she is truly hungry, “hunger” also functions metaphorically for sexual desire. She is not given the beads by a husband but scratches them out of the dust herself, and they are “small as pollen,” which itself signifies fertility.

The few small beads again highlight that the narrator lacks a husband and that she has no motherly duties such as caring for the children that would ultimately allow her ascension as an ancestral spirit; however, she takes ownership of the beads as her own and has scabbled in the dirt to wrest them from the earth by her own energy, demonstrating her power as a human even without the fire of divine love that in the Karangamythos is the sacred origin of life (SoL 5). She has discovered her own gift, one representative of fertilizing pollen rather than of a husband’s scrotum and seed— independent of her oviducts and ancestral consanguinity.

The narrator’s sherds, too, reference the maternal role she has not fulfilled. When initially she discovers them, she describes them as “potsherds that would not fit together and form a whole roundness” (Stockenström 16), and since for Karanga society a jar represents the woman’s uterus, so these sherds represent the narrator’s lack of
generativity. She is “too scantily endowed to fashion something” herself, and so seeks fulfillment through giving her “imagination rein” (17); she envisions “graves… walls submerged in dust and… settlements and streets crumbled into insignificance” (16), but she is “changing nothing in the nothingness” (17). Despite this feeling of powerlessness to renew the environment around her, she does take satisfaction in having the power to possess: she says,

I know the interior of my tree… as I can know something that is mine and mine only, my dwelling place into which no one ever penetrates…. These are… my sherds…. Every time I step outside, the world belongs to me… [and] I am once again a human being and powerful…. Reborn every time from the belly of the baobab” (13-14).

Even though the sherds and ashes of which she claims possession represent her inability to be reborn as *mudzimu*, the tree in which she lives, and of which she also claims possession, itself functions as the instrument of her rebirth—not as an ancestral spirit but as a human free from enslavement—a “supreme being”—able to interpret and to direct: “I stand full of myself. The sun defines my shadow. The wind clothes me. I point to the air and say: air make me live. And when the scrub-warbler calls, he calls in my name” (14). In fact, even as the perpetually reborn narrator individually commands her surroundings, her manner of rebirth—although non-traditional from a Karanga perspective—does not break entirely with Shona cultural values, for “an old tree…
[ceremonially] symbolizes the ancestors, its great age represents the high dignity of the dead” (SoD 117-18). In particular, this symbol is seen in the case of “a mother [who] loses her child…. By going naked to the tree (witches wear no clothes) the angry mother wants to warn her ancestors that she will become a witch if they do not help her straightaway” (117).

To affront the ancestors, Aschwanden explains, so as to ensure their attention, the angry mother would throw boiled millet seed at the tree rather than offering un-boiled seed with proper ceremony; Stockenström demonstrates knowledge of such practices: the narrator “laughed at the… women who… reverently set down a handful of millet grains on the great leaf of a fever tree beside the silent treetrunk… long before [she] was looked upon as the spirit of a tree” (Stockenström 27). However, there is a telling distinction between the Shona view that the spirit of their ancestral line is manifest in the tree—“in important ceremonies, trees very often represent the tribe” (SoL 110)—and the view of Stockenström’s narrator who found ridiculous “local rituals… [to] placate the spirit of the tree… [so] he will watch over you” (Stockenström 26-27).

Because “’A tree branches out in the way a family does’” (SoL 110), for the Shona an ancient tree demonstrates the ancestral potency; “the branches and fruits symbolize… decendants and point to… greatness [of]… an ancestral spirit” (KM 267). A Shona has already inherited his fathers’ blood (SoL 6) and his tribal totem-names (107)
that “honor the blood, i.e. the ancestral spirits… [which] are as present as the living” (123).

While the narrator does “revere” the tree in which she lives (Stockenström 30), and for lack of other companions she speaks to it, even though she is “reborn… from the belly of the baobab” (14) this rebirth is as a singular human being and not as the branch of a tribe reborn as a manifestation of the ancestral spirit. With “no links backwards or forwards” (55) she has no connection with the consanguineous spirit of the tree: “I ignore all the spirits save that which lives in me…. Perhaps I was obstinately defiant where I had brought nothing of my own with me and local rituals appeared without content, and I created my own rituals for my own indwelling spirit and without preknowledge went and picked up a black shell and a white shell” (26).

Even as she refuses to sacrifice millet grains—signifying beer one will brew for the ancestors—to the familial spirits the tree represents, the narrator’s indwelling spirit directs her to select shells of black and white. “Traditionally among the Shona, combining black and white is symbolic”—says GodhiBvocho in “Ornaments as social and chronological icons: A case study of southeastern Zimbabwe”—“Ancestral spirit mediums (vadzimu) can be identified by black and white beads” (12); however, Stockenström’s narrator finds in this color combination, instead of beads, shells. “The conus shells symbolize fertility of land, animals and plants as well as the people themselves,” continues Bvocho; “Chiefs wore them as representatives of the communities
and the landscape” (12). She is speaking here specifically of chiefs who are vassals of the Rozvi Mambo, who largely controlled southeastern Africa at the time Stockenström’s text takes place, so it is meaningful that the narrator asserts she acts without foreknowledge although on a smaller scale, the role the narrator is to play in the coastal city, “head slave-girl of the richest man” in town, parallels that of a vassal chief. While the vadzimu represent familial Shona spirits of lesser stature than the ancestral mhondoro embodied in the tree, the shell signifies an increased breadth of fertility beyond the patrilineage to include land, animals, and plants.

Stockenström’s narrator reflects and elaborates slightly on her religious experience that day of her arrival in the coastal city. “I… shot down to the sea and picked up a white shell and a black shell. For I am of water. I know what turns the air to water. Then, so they say, it began to rain” (36). Here another sign comes into play: the narrator can summon rain—but this is beyond the power of the vadzimu represented by the black and white beads. According to M. Gelfand’s “The Shona Religion,” it is the mhondoro who bring rain (37). Not only that, but the narrator elsewhere says, “In humility I thank my water-spirit for guiding me” (Stockenström 65). Neither the vadzimu nor the mhondoro is a water-spirit.

The most prominent Shona water-spirit, a mermaid njuzu, guides traditional healers (n’anga) in their art (Bernard 150), and although the narrator “knew how to extinguish attacks of fever with [her] water-being” (Stockenström 20), she has not experienced
the conversion experience typical to a n’anga. “The ‘calling’ is usually preceded by the candidate suffering an illness(ukuthwasa), although sometimes, especially in the case of children, they just happen to be playing near the water at the time. Individuals who have had such experiences commonly report seeing snakes, mermaids, or even their ancestors” says Bernard; “the ‘calling’ … usually involves the physical submersion of the candidate under the water of a certain river pool or the sea (for a few hours, to days or even years) after which it is alleged that the individual emerges wearing the full regalia of a healer—a symbolic snake wrapped around his/her body and medicines” (149). It is unlikely she would be considered n’anga.

Even though the narrator is “looked upon as the spirit of a tree” (Stockenström 27), she lacks the most basic characteristic which the Shona attribute to ancient trees: no children branch out from her, and she is not rooted in her parents’ community. That being the case, one would expect her to be spiritually dead, yet she performs rituals with black and white medicines as one would for vadzimu, these medicines are shells such as a chief would use to symbolize the fertility of the landscape, she summons rain as one would through mohndoro, and she performs healing as though under direction of n’juzu. While in Shona custom a single medium may be possessed of multiple spirits such as would explain this nexus, Stockenström’s narrator maintains she is possessed of but a single spirit (26). Her insistence on individual empowerment—generativity without ma-
ternalism, independent of the ancestors and of myriad spiritual influence—can only be laughable from the perspective of the Shona culture.
Chapter 7

I TREAD MY OWN TRACK: WHAT A TREE DEFINES

Of the traditional feminine roles known to the narrator of Stockenström’s *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, none allows her fulfillment. Her relationship with the stranger demonstrates that even when she is treated “like a real lady” (68), a mistress is no better than a slave insofar as she “was simply someone together with someone else” (46). As critical as motherhood would be to her participation in Shona culture she was denied it as her children were auctioned away from her, yet neither did she turn to the oppositional role of “witch.” Further, her insistent correlation—growing out of the little people’s treating her as holy—of impotence with deity and power with humanity—as well as the conceptual tension between, on the one hand, the numerous spirits her behavior manifests and, on the other, the single spirit within her she claims—make the label “goddess” problematic at best.

Frustrated with the narrow roles that have been provided her, the narrator “searched and opened a way and found” (10) “the choice of paths in reality and in [her] sleep” (98) which lead her to *transposition* away from the socially expected feminine archetypes: to “altering of the thetic position—the destruction of the old position and the formation of a new one” (Kristeva 59). For Kristeva, the thetic frame within which one operates “conditions the possibilities of truth specific to language” (58); one’s language offers a finite set of rational conceptualizations. However, she further specifies that there
is “at work in the unconscious… [this] process [transposition]—the *passage from one sign system to another*” (59) which “implies the abandonment of a former sign system, the passage to a second via an instinctual intermediary common to the two systems, and the articulation of the new system with its new representability” (60). Kristeva introduces transposition as a specific process by which mimesis functions to produce a new set of possibilities—the language of poetic verisimilitude wherein the subject of enunciation rather than an external object of observation is revealed.

Also pertinent to analysis of *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is Kristeva’s observation that transposition relates to Freud’s techniques of dream-work (60). Because until the text’s terminal event its narrator describes time spent in *cycles* of waking and dreaming, Kristeva’s specification that transposition necessitates “destruction of the old [thetic] position” (59) may seem inapplicable (in that the narrator moves from waking to dream but then back again), yet for Kristeva, “every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality)… [so] its ‘place’ of enunciation and its denoted ‘object’ are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated” (60). The ongoing testing of the meaning-making strategies available to one with reference to one’s experience results in a constant reinterpretation of one’s position. In this sense, the narrator’s waking frame of reference is destroyed each time she enters her dreams, but the converse is also true: her outlook upon waking is different than it was upon her falling asleep. Rather
than an alternation between a static waking state and a static dreaming state, each of these changes in perspective transposes the narrator from a given subject position into a new, unique one she subconsciously creates.

The narrator’s attitude presents an interesting diversion from that Freud and Kristeva hold with respect to dreams. Whereas they focus on a dream’s “representability” in the waking world (60), the narrator specifies early on that “Then only [while dreaming], do I live” and underscores precedence of dreaming over waking life by noting dreaming is not “an escape” (Stockenström 7). While her dreams include imagery with symbolic meaning, they do not represent her waking life but instead exist as superior to it and real in their own right.

For the most part, the narrator’s experience of “dream[ing] outward” relates to rose quartz (16, 54, 101). In the context of the story, this image can be traced to a group of hunters who, after the expedition has long been seeking Portugal, describe a city which is considerably closer: “the city lay swept by the wind in a red desert. Sunbaked red walls. And behind it on the horizon rose the rough jagged rosy peaks of the mountains” (83); the narrator conflates the imagery: “In this dream in which I am forced to live, I take refuge more often in the city of rose quartz, for thus have I already adapted the hunters’ story. Not only does the mountain glitter rosily, but also that city” (101).

Of import are the symbolic connotations of mountains in Shona culture. “Mountains are not only symbol of God’s existence, they also demonstrate his might. Moun-
tains are immovable and eternal—like God” (KM 218). “No-one has ever seen God, not even in a dream” (271) the Karanga insist to Aschwanden, yet insofar as Stockenström’s narrator conflates the mountains symbolic of God with the rose quartz that constitutes them, she experiences unity with God in her dreams.

I am of a self-sufficient crystalinity, transmuted into pure bliss. I am one whole, and divided too and present in everything everywhere…. The water too has become quartz, everything has, stone and water and man have the consistency of quartz and the glory and the glorious knowledge of splintering and remaining glorious. (Stockenström 101)

Not only does the narrator experience herself as quartz such as that of which the mountain, representing God, is made, but also her experience of unity with everything coincides with the Shona conceptualization of God: “‘God (Mwari) is water, he is wind and earth, he is everything, and there is no division: God is in all things, and God is far, far away’” (KM 20). Here again too arises the specific theme of humanity as glorious though this time without a corresponding devaluation of deity.

Even though in her dreams, the narrator experiences a unity with God similar to the Shona conceptualization of Mwari, this experience nevertheless represents a transposition away from the feminine goddess role which has been expected of her. For one thing, even though the Shona describe God as being “in all things” (20), they also argue, “‘God is far from men and… nobody can approach him personally’” (210); while the nar-
rator dreams of being “one whole and divided too” and of “splintering and remaining glorious” (Stockenström 101), for the Shona “God comprises the strictest unity…. God… is indivisible” (KM 213).

Although the narrator’s dreams relate closely, if problematically, to Shona conceptualizations of God, there are also instances in which dream influences her relations with the little people. Before they are killed, she experiences the little people as “dream figures… that… really see me but also do not see me because I exist in their dream, and they feed their dream by caring for me” (92). It is their unwillingness to acknowledge her as human (100) which forces her to inhabit the dream (101); their setting her apart as a dream goddess-figure thus directly leads to her dream transposition into unity with God.

Yet, “when [she awakes]… she feels crinkled and stiff….

Let the gods stare over our heads, the stranger [her final master] had once said. They know what they see.

That was precisely what I did not know. Wanted to join in.

So I thought.” (101)

The narrator is unsatisfied with dreaming of godhood yet still being powerless when awake. She therefore “[follows her] own path diligently, will drink this parting poison gift in the nourishing awareness that dream leads to dream.”

As she ultimately moves from her dream of godhood to “the upside-down” (111), the meaning of her final transposition is expressed symbolically through symbiotic inte-
raction of three images: the water-spirit serves the role of what Kristeva terms the semiotic *chora*; the baobab, that of Stockenström’s reader; and the bats, that of the narrator and, by extension, women as a class—

I thank my water-spirit for guiding me. And for the thunderstorms that wash the baobab nice and clean and spur him to bud and all at once thrust out all his leaves and hang up his great flowers one by one on twigs, white and crumpled, to be fertilized by bats…. When the tree blooms… I see the journey as a confusion I had to undergo. (65)

The *chora*, represented by the water-spirit, has been described at some length in the second chapter. Kristeva envisions it as a mobile, maternal and nurturing articulation of drive energy which disrupts the subsequently interlaid thetic modality. That is to say, among other things, it is fluid, and it is feminine in the sense Michael du Plessis cites in his 1988 “Bodies and Signs: Inscriptions of Femininity in John Coetzee and Wilma Stockenström”: “Kristeva asserts [in Marks and de Courtivron’s *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*] that ‘a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists’” (120-21). It is this negative quality that disrupts “social structures and their ideological, coercive, and necrophilic manifestations” (Kristeva 15), “natural and social resistances, limitations, and stagnations” (17)—and it is through disrupting stagnation and coercion that the *chora* nurtures individual growth.
The symbolism of water in Shona cultures has likewise been considered, particularly in the sections relating to the feminine roles of “mother” and “goddess;” it primarily represents fertility, so in that regard it correlates with Kristeva’s conceptualization of the chora as being maternal insofar as fertility is prerequisite to motherhood. Even though Stockenström’s narrator is unable to fulfill the traditional maternal role, the water spirit within her represents generativity. The direction of the water spirit enables her to view “with ridicule” (7) the “journey [as] a confusion [she] had to undergo” (65) and thereby to transpose herself from the roles into which she has been placed, to deny their hold on her in order to assert herself in a new role.

The objective contradictions between on the one hand the social roles the narrator has tried to assume and on the other her concrete experience of her place in the world pulverize the thetic symbols she had accepted as true, and through the trial she undergoes, her self-process drives her to synthesize a new Other based on her current context. No longer is she defined by the various masters that have laid claim to her, nor by the community of slaves, nor the tribe she dimly recollects; now she defines herself with reference to the tree she inhabits.

The titular tree—the ancient baobab which serves as the nexus of the narrator’s transformation—has associations pertinent to this experience of rebirth and to the generative power of humanity. A tree may be invoked euphemistically to reference the male penis (Jacobson-Widding 11) while the baobab particularly “looks like it’s pregnant” ac-
cording to Emmanuel Sigauke during a 2008 interview. This identification of both masculine and feminine qualities in the baobab is noted in existing criticism as du Plessis describes the tree as “an emblem of bisexuality” in the manner Hélène Cixous defines as “the ensemble of the one and the other” i.e. male and female (du Plessis 124, again citing Marks and de Courtivron); however, since Cixous’ “bisexuality” entails “inspecting the process of the same and the other… infinitely dynamised by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another” (124), projecting it onto an insensate tree would be nonsensical. In fact, though, the tree transcends vegetable essence in that its person is projected onto the reader with the narrator’s direct address: “This… I admit honestly to you, trusty baobab… my midpoint. I revere you. …I inhabit you” (Stockenström 30). Clearly during the process of reading one is “inspecting the process of the same and the other” and experiencing a “process of exchange from one subject [the author] to another [the reader]” (du Plessis 124).

Although her possessions—the ashes, grinding-stones, beads and sherds—symbolically reference lack of fertility according to Karanga cultural expectations, reinforcing that she has no family to ceremonially recall her spirit, through the narrator’s laying claim to the baobab and symbolically to her narrative’s reader, she ruptures the logic which checks her generativity; she transcends the symbolic prohibition against her own rebirth: “I inhabit you” she says to the baobab her reader—and in fact her reader extends beyond the tree as she also addresses in second-person the women who “taught [her] the
game with men” (15) and her dying benefactor (20); through the reader the narrator comes to life, being reborn in a reader’s consciousness each time the book is read just as within the text she is “reborn every time from the belly of the baobab” (Stockenström 14).

Not only does the tree serve as symbol of the narrator’s rebirth, it is burdened with the responsibility to internalize her tale:

I have so much to tell of a trip to a new horizon that became an expedition to a tree…. I decorate you line after line with our hallucinations so that you can digest, outgrow, make smooth this ridiculousness, preserve the useless information in your thick skin till the day of your spontaneous combustion. (30-31)

“And in fact everything has shrunk to what a tree defines” (45). Within the text, the narrator here references the tree as defining her horizon: “Here there is… a new life in which I travel all around the baobab and never lose sight of it.” This phrase also symbolizes the reader’s defining the parameters of the narrator’s existence through imagining the world of the text.

Although her expectation of the baobab’s spontaneous combustion is fact-based—if ancient baobabs do not catch fire they eventually collapse into dust—textual parallels show the baobab represents not just an individual reader but human civilization as a vessel of the knowledge she passes on. Like a baobab, each society eventually collapse such
as she realizes during her travels: “Was I perhaps roaming over courtyards and squares, fortifications, terraces, conduits, halls and shanties, settlements and streets crumbled into insignificance?” the narrator wonders (16).

Until the inevitable collapse, however, the baobab carries the tale of her journey, and this too is represented symbolically. As do real baobabs, that in the text fills with water—she calls it her “water source” (30). Again water represents fertility and choric femininity. The narrator “bear[s] the murmur of waters subliminally with [her]” (20), and the tree bears water it has sucked up during the rainy season. As water in part represents the narrator’s ability to “determine appearance and reality” (101), it does also that of the tree for “everything has shrunk to what a tree defines” (45).

Besides this, the baobab is “fertilized by bats” (65), so when the narrator transposes herself into a bat (101), this implies she will be fertilizing the tree, and when one recognizes the tree as her reader, one sees that the expeditionary tale—“the poetic history of a crazy eagerness that was finally all we could cling to” (30)—is fertilizer to “digest, outgrow;” still, however, the results of the narrator’s investments in the tree are not guaranteed. “Baobab… around whose sensitive flowers unfolding like moons so many bats flap by night, in whose forks the rain pours rainwater for me, my water-spirit is silent about you” (96), she says, then continues without transition, “Once I found an injured bat on the ground beside the daylight-filled crevice.” While the baobab and the bats general-
ly live in symbiosis, the narrator’s water-spirit does not acknowledge the baobab as an ally, and the tree can only do so much to assist bats.

Yet, the narrator does ultimately transform into a bat herself, so considering the symbolism of bats is illuminating. Says Sigauke, bats are related to the spirits of the dead. That being the case, the narrator’s achieving bat-hood by drinking poison would perhaps be no surprise from a Shona perspective; her spirit, bereft of its body, roams in the animal. More noteworthy, however, is that bats are viewed as being supernaturally powerful through their perceived hybridity between bird and mammal (Sigauke); bats are an omen that something is wrong and needs to be rectified. As the narrator has been unable to contentedly manifest herself fully in any of the feminine roles availed to her by any of the cultures with which she has come into contact, nor even in the dream of godhood, she transforms into a fearsome and powerful hybrid, harbinger of needed change and fertilizing agent of the upside-down tree.

Even though the narrator’s physical transformation does not occur until the text’s final page, the whole of her narrative documents her approach to this end. Although dealing with various phases of her life, the non-linear retrospection occurs just before this transformative terminal event. “Everything that has been in my life is always with me, simultaneously” she says (66); “The world stretches… as far as the master’s eye can see, but I wanted to go still farther” (44); “I searched and opened a way and found” (10); “I will gain access to a new kind of dream” (92); “I will find rest in the upside-down” (111).
While a bat of course routinely sleeps upside-down, this culminating event emphasizes a dimension of symbolic relationship between the bat-narrator and the baobab-reader. The baobab is typically green only briefly during the year since the veldt is so dry, so because its bare branches look like roots, it is referred to as growing “upside down” (96). The baobab and the bat are in this sense united in being upside down, in which position the bat seeks rest, no longer struggling to fit a cookie-cutter archetype but contentment as a powerful hybrid. The narrator entreats finally in her last act before drinking the transformative poison, “Baobab, merciful one. My baobab” (111), recalling her earlier request that the tree, “full of [her] scars” (31), “make smooth this ridiculousness” (30), the “confusion [she] had to undergo” (65) of being “a mistress and mother and goddess. Enough to make you laugh” (111).
Although literary scholasticism today largely eschews historical framing, maintaining that the proof of a theory lies in its ability to explain a text and that outside circumstances in general bear no relevance to such evaluation, Kristeva specifically situates her theory at the interstices of text and current events through arguing that literature and politics are inseparable (17). Her introduction introduces for consideration her inquiry, “Under which conditions does this ‘esoterism,’ [the incomprehensible] in displacing the boundaries of socially established signifying practices, correspond to socioeconomic change and, ultimately, even to revolution?” (16).

Although she never clearly deals with the economic aspect she raises, this passage clarifies her view with regards to conditions capacitating revolution:

As the place of production for a subject who transgresses the thetic by using it as a necessary boundary—but not as an absolute or an origin—poetic language and the mimesis from which it is inseparable… may… set in motion what dogma represses [the self ‘in process/on trial’]…. And thus, its complexity unfolded by its practices, the signifying process joins social revolution. (Kristeva 61)

Esoterism facilitates revolution when it demotes the thetic from ordination to “a necessary boundary.” Through retaining the broken rule, keeping it visible in
juxtaposition with the revolutionary self, art illustrates the means of transgression as a model for social change. Such tactics as fiction and laughter, through undermining the perspectives of the dominant social order, assail the (also constructed) standard which has been venerated as truth. In doing so, they resuscitate the subjective process of trying new and revolutionary perspectives.

In conclusion, however, Kristeva reaches beyond economics and politics in favor of the “notion of the ethical as coextensive with textual practice” (234). “The text… [as] a practice assuming all positivity in order to negativize it and thereby make visible the process underlying it” (233) creates a transparency necessary to cultural adaptation. She does, with regard to politics, decry a “libertarian ethics based on knowledge” as ensconcing “the necessarily oppressive System” (234), yet also maintains that “This conception of the ethical function of art separates us, in a radical way, from one that would commit art to serving as the representation of a so-called progressive ideology” (233). Any political goal, then, stultifies the ongoing re-definition of self and culture that laughter and art enable and which, in Kristeva’s view, are necessary to human adaptation and survival.

Writing at a place in history where an upswell of feminism asserts the right of Afrikaner women to transgress the traditional Calvinist social roles that have historically constrained them, Stockenström expresses herself through the character of an early sixteenth century Shona slave woman; in doing so, she explores a similarity between the
plights of Afrikaner feminists and their contemporary anti-apartheid liberationists. The roles pressed upon women both Calvinist and Shona are not God-given, are not even true, but are instead vulnerable to contravention by those who would bravely change themselves to change the world they inhabit.

Applying to Stockenström’s *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* a Kristevan interpretation in accordance with *Revolution in Poetic Language*, one traces the assumption of dominant cultural roles, their being undermined as they are revealed to be preposterous, and the narrator transforming herself into a hybrid figure of symbolic power. Demonstrating this transformation makes Stockenström’s text art from a Kristevan perspective. Rejection of the western “mistress” role illuminates tensions between the ideals of love and possession; because Shona culture holds each symbol to have both a positive and negative interpretation, rejecting the role of “mother” is insufficient for cultural transformation until one also rejects the “witch” role; and rejecting the “goddess” role is at once the most complex and the simplest of all as the narrator manifests powers such as calling rain and cooling fever without the usual Shona spiritual accoutrements at the same time she laments the powerlessness of deity and celebrates human empowerment. The narrator’s water spirit guides her along her journey of transformation; through dream, she achieves atonement, becoming one with the rose quartz of the mountain which symbolizes God; she inscribes her tale on the baobab, her reader, who will preserve and outgrow it; and finally, facing death, she rejects not only
traditional feminine roles but even the atonement she has achieved in that she enters a
new kind of dream as a dangerous and powerful hybrid bat. All this correlates with
Kristeva’s argument.

The text is artistic and ethical in a Kristevan sense since it illustrates individual—
and implicitly social—change. It is also political in that it encourages, during South
Africa’s turmoil over apartheid, ascension of the Shona woman to a more powerful
station. There is one way in which the text diverges from Kristeva’s ideology, however:
Kristeva believes the process of self and cultural development must be constantly
ongoing whereas, on the other hand, Stockenström’s narrator after her powerful
transformation seeks “rest in the upside-down” (111).
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