

Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Psychological Reading

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Toni Morrison's Beloved is a novel about motherhood and mothering. Specifically, it is a book about the slave woman as mother. The events of the novel, set in the first half of the nineteenth century when the slave population in the United States had increased significantly, narrate the fortunes and misfortunes of Sethe, an African slave confined to a plantation in Kentucky named Sweet Home. The owners of the plantation were a childless couple named the Garners. Sethe, unlike most African slave women, had a measure of control over her future on this plantation. She had the option of selecting one of the five slave men on this plantation as her husband and the good fortune of bearing his four children and planning the future for herself and her family, options that few other slaves possessed. Because of her owners and their relatively compassionate views toward their slaves, Sethe, a courageous and daring woman, dared to imagine a future in which her children could escape the bondage of slavery.

Morrison's novel, therefore, defines an Africanist presence in a most unusual way. Sethe, a young slave child when the reader meets her, knows little of her parents. She knows that her mother had worked in the rice fields of South Carolina until she was forced to move to another plantation. An unexpected encounter on her way to Sweet Home allowed Sethe to meet her mother, during which time, her mother showed her a mark under her left breast, a mark that would identify her in the event that her mother were hanged or burned. The mark, which signified the indignity of slavery in its dehumanizing effects, haunted Sethe all her life, and, as a girl of nine years on her way to Sweet Home to work for the Garners, Sethe witnessed the killings of a large group of slaves and believed that she perceived the mark on a woman who was hanged and burned and who resembled what she remembered of her mother's body.

The horror of that event was always at the back of Sethe's mind, and the psychological theories of the twentieth century would suggest that, for Sethe, the mother was associated with death. Old Nan, who had come to America on the same slave ship as Sethe's mother, tells Sethe the story of her birth. Nan tells her that Sethe was the only child that her mother did not throw overboard, and she tells her that Sethe was given her name because that name was her father's name.

The air of mystery surrounding her birth and the search in Sethe's mind for her origins cause Sethe to contemplate her existence, and this search for origins prepares Sethe for her attempts to accept the "Other" in her life—the white folks who have little concern about her origins but who wish to plan her future for their own good.

Sethe, whose behavior demonstrated her will to succeed, capitalized on the fact that the Garner plantation was a relatively small one, where there were only five male slaves and two female slaves. She constructed for herself a life in which she did not shirk her duties, but she continued to define herself as an individual, a faithful worker on the Garner plantation, but also as a woman who looked toward a future with her husband and her children.¹

Toni Morrison's concerns with this kind of slave woman may be best understood by reading her book of literary criticism, Playing in the Dark, in which she laments the absence in American literature of the ability to know and to completely understand an Africanist presence in that literature. African characters are very much a part of the literature of the nineteenth century in the writings of both male and female writers. Yet, the mind, the consciousness, the discourse of African characters are submerged in the writing.

Morrison analyzed the works of Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, and Willa Cather in Playing in the Dark and concluded that in the works of those writers deemed most valuable in American literature at that time, there was a blindness to an Africanist discourse, to the mind and spirit of Africans inhabiting these works of American writers. Morrison insists that it is essential to analyze the absence of an understanding of Africanism in order to complete the history of literary criticism in America as it has contributed to the culture of America at this time:

“What Africanism became for, and how it functioned in, the literary imagination is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary ‘blackness,’ the nature—even the cause—of literary ‘whiteness.’ What is it for? What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as ‘American’? If such an inquiry ever comes to maturity, it may provide access to a deeper reading of American literature—a reading not completely available now, not least, I suspect, because of the studied indifference of most literary criticism to these matters” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 9).

Morrison’s novels, particularly *Beloved*, suggest what might result in a deeply probed Africanist discourse embodied in this novel, a discourse articulated in the character of Sethe. The difference, boldness, and contributions of an Africanist discourse can no longer be ignored in the literature of America, but there is still much that can be said about a female Africanist discourse as Morrison has portrayed it in the character of Sethe. Morrison claims that in the early decades of American literature, American authors were perplexed when an Africanist presence emerged in their writing. White American authors were disturbed, confused, unsettled by the Africanist presences that loomed large in their own writings. What was at stake, as Morrison describes it, were questions of freedom, authority, intelligence and accomplishment, and a sense of power. The “new” American in the nineteenth century was poised to establish itself as a newer and grander model of cultural superiority.

Morrison explains the difference that an Africanist presence might make in the public discourse in this way:

“Knowledge, however mundane and utilitarian, plays about in linguistic images and forms cultural practice. Responding to culture—clarifying, explicating, valorizing, translating, transforming, criticizing—is what artists everywhere do, especially writers involved in the founding of a new nation. Whatever their personal formally political responses to the inherent contradiction of a free republic deeply committed to slavery, nineteenth-century writers were mindful of the presence of black people. More important, they addressed, in more or less passionate ways, their views on that difficult present” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 9-10).

Women writers at this time in America were emerging as valued and accomplished members of the literati. Morrison discusses at length Willa Cather’s novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, a novel she considers quite unrepresentative of Cather’s talent as a writer. The white female head of a plantation, Sapphira, weak, ill, and incapable of understanding the life and mind of her personal slave, Nancy, a person strong and sure of herself. Yet, Sapphira considers Nancy subordinate, inferior to herself, and she creates situations in which Nancy is forced to be a fugitive in the slave household. Morrison says, “The absence of mother love, always a troubling concern of Cather’s, is connected to the assumption of a slave’s natal isolation. These are bizarre and disturbing deformations of reality that normally lie mute in novels containing Africanist characters, but Cather does not repress them altogether. The character she creates is at once a fugitive within the household and a sign of the sterility of the fiction-making imagination when there is no available language to clarify or even name the source of unbelievability” (Morrison, *Dark* 23).

To some extent, American audiences were and are unprepared for an Africanist discourse. American women writers, particularly in the South, attempted to demonstrate the harmfulness to the American psyche created by an inability and an unwillingness to identify with slaves and to come to terms with the distortions created in the white American psyche because of a refusal to identify with the personhood of slaves.

Sarah Moore Grimke, a member of a prominent South Carolinian family, wrote and spoke of the harmfulness of slavery in the United States in her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman, Addressed to Mary S. Parker, President of the Female Anti-Slavery Society*. She and her sister Angelina Grimke became a vital part of the anti-slavery movement in 1838. Her main interests in her letter written to Mary Parker concern the widespread disregard of the minds and thoughts of women in general, but her interests lay in particular with the general disregard of the minds and bodies of slave women.

In this letter, she refers to the ignominious treatment of slave women: “Our southern cities are whelmed beneath a tide of pollution; the virtue of female slaves is wholly at the mercy of irresponsible tyrants, and women are bought and sold in our slave markets, to gratify the brutal lust of those who bear the name of Christians” (Weeks and Perry 67). Her statements that slave women were treated as animals, not only because their bodies were broken by hard manual labor, but mainly because they were prostitutes for their male slave owners, was widely accepted by most Southerners.

Grimke's main concern in this letter was a call for the acceptance of women as notable and accomplished thinkers, slave as well as free, the equals of men in their intelligence, their devotion to country, and their moral sensibilities.

Harriet Jacobs, a slave woman who was eventually freed, exposed the mind and feelings of a slave woman in her book, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, published in 1862. Jacobs lived an eventful life narrated in this autobiography. Born a slave, she was forced at an early age to become a slave in the household of Dr. James Norcom, a physician who abused her sexually and verbally for many years. She had several children, some of whom became slaves as well, and she was forbidden direct contact with her children. But she had opportunities to view them from the attic of a relative's house and keep apprised of their condition through indirect sources.

Jacobs' book is an account of her sufferings as a slave and of her eventual freedom. Although she was claimed by Dr. Norcom, she fell in love with a man whom she wished to marry, but she was forbidden to do so by her owners. Her question in her diary regarding this dilemma was this: "Why does the slave ever love?" By this question, she meant that a slave could not live an ordinary human life, loving, working, planning, because the slave was considered a beast of burden, not a human being.

My argument in this paper is that the condition of slavery, even after slavery was abolished in the United States, became the metaphor for the relations between men and women in this country. Slavery had much more to do with sexism than it did with racism, and that legacy has lived long after the days of literal slavery have come and gone.

Toni Morrison's novel Beloved deals with both the suffering and the creativity of slave mothers. There have been many essays and books written by black women who suggest that the ingenuity and strength of slave women enabled them to function in creative ways during the years they spent in slavery, and that the resourcefulness of black women enabled them to make significant contributions to American culture after slavery.

Elizabeth Keckley, a slave born in 1825 in Dinwiddie, Virginia, was a skillful seamstress who married a fugitive slave and had a son by that man. When she was able to make enough money for her sewing, she paid for her freedom and for that of her son. After moving to Washington, D.C., she continued her work and opened her own shop. When the Civil War broke out, she was invited by Mary Todd Lincoln to become her personal maid and seamstress in the White House. From that experience, she wrote a book about her years as a slave and her years in the White House.

Alice Walker, in her collection of essays, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, suggests that black women in the South were particularly resourceful, both before and after slavery. She calls them "artists" who found within themselves a spirituality that allowed them to paint, to write, to sing, to compose music, and to write novels. She praises her own mother for her ability to grow beautiful flowers and for her talent for making her house and everything in it a place of beauty.

Patricia Hill Collins, in her thorough investigation of the lives of black women both before and after slavery, suggests that the society and culture which slaves had known in West Africa enabled them to endure many of the attempts of their white owners to break their spirits and their bodies:

"Enslaved Africans were property, and they resisted the dehumanizing effects of slavery by recreating African notions of family as extended kin units. Blood lines carefully monitored in West Africa were replaced by a notion of an extended family/community consisting of their black 'brothers' and sisters. For black women, the domestic sphere encompassed a broad range of kin and community relations beyond the nuclear family household" (Collins 49).

Collins explains the practice of mothering and work as the slaves from West Africa knew: "Before enslavement, African women combined work and family without seeing a conflict between the two. In West African societies women routinely joined child care with their contributions to precapitalist political economies" (Collins 49).

It is worth recalling that the bodies of slaves, male and female, were considered chattel, property utilized for the purposes of increasing the wealth of white slave owners by their physical labor in the cotton, indigo, or rice fields of the South. As a result of this objectification of slave bodies, there was no question as to their human rights, to the limits of suffering a human body can endure, and to the distortion of the psyches of male and female slaves. The bodies of women, in particular, were objectified, because their offspring would supply additional slave bodies for the increase of capital for their slave owners. There was little consideration for the lives of slave mothers, their care during or after pregnancy, and the general well-being of their health.

Fanny Kemble, a British actress who married a wealthy Philadelphian in 1834 who was heir to one of the largest plantations in Georgia, recounts her horror upon learning that the slave women who delivered babies were forced to return to hard labor in the rice fields only three weeks after their babies were born (Weeks and Perry 49).

But before Toni Morrison's Beloved, not many writers or writings had attempted to recreate the internal life of the mind and the spirit of a slave woman. One might well paraphrase the thought of the contemporary psychoanalytic critic Julia Kristeva to ask, "What do we know about the discourse of the slave mother?" In other words, what do we know about the minds, the emotions, the psychological forces operating in these slaves?

This essay uses the tools of current literary critical theory, particularly the theories of motherhood contained in the writings of Helene Cixous, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva, to examine the life of Sethe, the main character of interest in this novel, and her relationship to her children. These literary theorists offer new and meaningful insights into the psychological processes operating in the relationships between mothers and their children, and their insights are particularly helpful in analyzing the relationships between slave mothers and their children. But beyond these important factors was the almost unconscious concerns of these theorists to demonstrate the relationship between woman, death, religion, and text. In these theorists, bodies and texts are intimately connected. In the discussion of the book Beloved, my emphasis is on the relationship of woman to these three significant homologies.

Jacques Lacan, a twentieth-century psychoanalyst and literary critic (1901-1981), believed that a true understanding of the relationship between mothers and children could be discerned by investigating what he termed the "existential break" between the child and the mother in the early life of the child. Although Lacan based many of his ideas on Freudian thought, he differed from Freud in this way: at birth, a child experiences a psychologically traumatic break with the mother that transcends the physiological break with the mother.

As explained by Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black in A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought, in the beginning stages of autonomy of the child, she undergoes a "powerful, transformative experience when she notices and then becomes captivated by her own image in a mirror" (Mitchell and Black 196). This mirrored image is the beginning of the building of an idealized version of the child's self. In this way, "the ego is built around illusions, images, which then become the basis for the imaginary" (196).²

The second grounding for the child's ego is human desire, the "wellspring of passion," which is ultimately unable to be gratified a desire which is built on the child's wish to be "totally captivating, to be everything for the (m)other" (196). According to Lacan, the child wishes to be "the completing object of the (m)other's desire" (196).

Language is of the utmost importance to Lacan. He suggests that language predates and shapes individual experience: "The child," says Lacan, "is born into language" (197). It is the father, however, not the mother who introduces language to the child.

The child is also born into a "primordial discord," a desire for connection to the world around him, and this longing gives birth to Desire, a Desire to be at one with nature and the mother again. This cannot be, because of the father, who lays claim to the mother. In Lacan's view, this longing is not merely sexual, but "a longing for a kind of existential reparation, perpetually unfulfillable, eternally stretching forth towards the desire for something else" (198).

The father's presence introduces the world of the symbolic order, the world of language, which destroys the imaginary union between the child and the mother. The imaginary also enables the child (or adult) to deal with the world of the Unconscious, or the "Other." In contemporary psychological parlance, the father's introduction to the symbolic other, or language, allows the child to perform the necessary task of separation from the mother and the construction of a uniquely individualized self.

The kind of disjunction felt between mother and child in Sethe's story is particularly traumatic because both were slaves and because Sethe had lost her mother in a literal sense before the age of twelve. Sethe floundered between a literal lack of knowledge of her mother and the isolation she experienced as a slave in South Carolina where her mother had been a slave. Lacan believed that children formulate various images of themselves based on their interactions with the other people in their lives and in the formulation of various narratives about themselves in that part of the mind he termed the "imaginary." The imaginary is the realm of language, and it provides the sense a child has of who he is in relation to those persons around him. Sooner or later, the images provide the basis of various narratives understood only partially by the individual.

Sethe's construction of herself began after witnessing her mother's death and after her removal to a plantation in Kentucky called Sweet Home. (The irony of this name is a part of the narratives of all the slaves at this location, a confusing but almost benevolent attempt to make this particular plantation different from others, a place that was tolerable to the five male slaves and two female slaves because of the absence of violent actions on the part of either Mr. or Mrs. Garner.)

As a young woman in her teens, Sethe found herself the property of the Garners, the owners of Sweet Home. The five male slaves there all possessed the last name of Garner, a fact that suggested their dehumanization by their owner. In other words, they were indistinguishable as human beings, signified only by the last name of their owner. Sethe did not possess this last name, nor did her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. Mr. Garner, an older man,

promoted an unorthodox attitude toward the slaves who worked for him: he wanted the male slaves to think of themselves as men, an attitude toward the slaves that may have been as close as Garner could get toward suggesting to his neighbors that they were decent human beings. Garner dealt with them in a relatively fair and equitable way. He boasted to other plantation owners that his slaves were different—they possessed a civility that marked them as men of a noble nature.

One of the four male slaves, Halle, worked out an arrangement with Mr. Garner whereby he would work seven days a week for five years in order to purchase freedom for his mother, Baby Suggs, who, having endured the brutality of slave owners all her life, could hardly comprehend the great pains taken by Mr. Garner to take her to Ohio and to arrange a place for her to live when the day of her freedom arrived.

Sethe had shared a space with Baby Suggs at Sweet Home and had come to have great affection for her. Knowing Baby Suggs and her son Halle was significant in Sethe's maturation, because she witnessed the profound love of Halle for his mother in his sacrifice of his weekends in order to purchase her freedom. In her young adult years, Sethe chose Halle as a husband in large part because of his great love for his mother.

Sethe was fortunate in having the Garners as owners, because she did not have to work in the fields as her mother had been forced to do, and she was able to fill a much-needed domestic role in the Garner household as an assistant to Mrs. Garner, where she served as cook, housekeeper, seamstress, and nurse to Mrs. Garner in her last illness.

It is possible to view Sethe's childhood and early adulthood from the perspective of Lacanian analysis. Her "imaginary" offered to her several possibilities of her origins; it suggested possible avenues for her to have a future that was, if not devoid of slavery, tolerable and productive. Her imaginary, most importantly, suggested that she desired to be the love-object of the Other in her life, in this case the mild-mannered white people with whom she had reached adulthood and whom she tried to emulate.

Morrison says of Sethe early in the novel, "Sethe had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that 'somebody' son who had fathered every one of her children" (*Beloved* 23). Even before Sethe had contemplated marriage, Baby Suggs had made sure that Sethe had a noble impression of motherhood. She had made the casual remark that "a man ain't nothing but a man, but a son? Well now, that's somebody" (*Beloved* 23).

In other words, with very little effort on her part, Sethe had the good fortune to have a marriage with a man she loved, three children whom she adored and another one on the way, along with a life-style that reflected the kind of stability valued in white European families. Whether Sethe pondered the significance of this stability or her good fortune is not clear. It appears early in the novel that she took this good fortune for granted, never believing that her function as a mother would be disrupted. In fact, the investment of her life as the wife of Halle, the mother of three children and another on the way, and the daughter-in-law of Baby Suggs expanded her growing sense of the value of her own subjectivity.³

Sethe was described by people who knew her as a woman of remarkable stillness, suggesting that she was calm and deliberate in difficult situations, as well as suggesting that she had cultivated the kind of practical rationality that would allow her to survive in a hostile culture. Her daughter Denver knew her as "a quiet, queenly woman," the kind of woman who could look danger in the face and not flinch, the kind of woman who, when the ghost in her house in Cincinnati had thrown the dog into the wall so hard that it broke two of his legs and dislocated his eye, Sethe took a hammer, knocked the dog unconscious, pushed his eye back in his head and set his bones (*Beloved* 12). It may be assumed that the stillness in her soul led her to the choice of Halle as a husband and led her to view her position as a mother as a meaningful vocation for her.

It may also be argued that, in terms of Lacanian analysis, she wanted to be the object of desire of her firstborn daughter, Beloved. Paul D was right to suggest later in the novel that it was dangerous for a woman to love her children as much as Sethe loved her children. The headnote to the novel suggests the power and intensity of Sethe's love for Beloved: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved" (*Beloved*).

Sethe, it may be assumed, loved this first girl-child with an extraordinary passion, perhaps because she wanted to give her a better life than she had experienced. The headnote comes from the New Testament book of Romans, an allusion to the degradation experienced by the Hebrew people from the beginning of the Bible and an affirmation on the part of God to love them and to redeem them from unjust treatment.

After Paul D finds Sethe after eighteen years of enslavement and wandering, he notes the intensity of Sethe's love for Denver, her second daughter. He has been troubled by Denver's question to Paul D about how long he was going to "hang around." When Sethe defends Denver, Paul D thinks to himself, "Risky. For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one" (*Beloved* 45).

When he reminds Sethe that Denver is almost grown, she responds with vehemence: “I don’t care what she is. Grown don’t mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What’s that supposed to mean? In my heart it don’t mean a thing” (*Beloved* 45).

There is also the argument for Lacanian analysis when *Beloved* comes back as a corporeal ghost to the house on the outskirts of Cincinnati to seek revenge for her mother’s act of violence that took her life that *Beloved* wants to be the sole object of her mother’s love, and she is not going to stay dead until she has the sole passion of Sethe. The violent disjunction between mother and child, the complete existential break between mother and child that Lacan considered so powerful occurred in its most graphic form with the death of *Beloved*.

The ghost/apparition almost convinces everyone in the household that she is the very corporeal presence of the murdered child. At most, however, she is a remembrance, a fleeting presence, a reminder of the cruelty of death. Denver is convinced at first because the ghost resembles her lost sister and because this presence knows all about the family. But when Denver observes *Beloved* rubbing Sethe’s shoulders the way Baby Suggs used to do, she perceives a forcefulness that almost chokes Sethe. Denver understands at this moment that this is a spirit of evil sent to torture Sethe.

Paul D understands that this is not the bodily presence of *Beloved* when she “moves” him psychologically into the cooling house so that she can have sex with him every night. He understands her power but is unable to resist her as a sexual object.

For Sethe, however, the return of *Beloved* means that she can erase some of the pain she inflicted upon herself by killing her child. She can at least fantasize what it might have been like to know the growing stages of her lost child: “*Beloved*, she my daughter. She mine. She come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing. . . . My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma’am is. They stopped us from getting there, but they didn’t stop you from getting here. Ha, ha.” (*Beloved* 202, 203).

Lacan’s psychoanalytic views may offer one perspective on the life of Sethe, but ultimately the views of Helene Cixous, French writer, analyst, and literary critic, and Julia Kristeva, Bulgarian born European literary critic who was much influenced by both Lacan and Cixous best define the subtleties of Morrison’s novel. When Helene Cixous introduced the theoretical concept of “writing the body” in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), she created a stir within the academy. She demanded in her essay “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways out/Forays,” that women “write the body.” She averred that “Woman is body more than man is” (Cixous 100). Men sublimate, she says, whereas women generally do not: “Women have not sublimated. Fortunately. They have saved their skins and their energy. They haven’t worked at planning the impasse of futureless lives. They have furiously inhabited these sumptuous bodies” (101).

This bold, revolutionary demand for women to “write the body” reflects her extraordinary perception that a theory of literary criticism designed and practiced by women would be the only way of confronting the various hierarchies that prevent women from participating in the central discourses of their cultures. This demand also suggests that, in the most basic ways, texts are related to bodies.

To Cixous, writing the body means first being in touch with one’s sexuality. For women writers, this means that all authentic writing is intricately involved with their sexual nature. It means the removal of the boundaries which have convinced women that they are lesser writers than men. The traditional male writer, says Cixous, always seeks a return on the capital or the love he has extended in the process of creation. This practice she terms “phallogocentric narcissism.”

Specifically, she writes, “A man is always proving something; he has to ‘show off,’ show up the others. Masculine profit is almost always mixed up with a success that is socially defined” (Cixous “Sorties” 96).

For women writers, on the other hand, there is always the possibility of joyful love, sustained bodily and emotional love, which she terms “jouissance,” a delight in creating that expects nothing in return. She says, “There is a link between the economy of femininity—the open, extravagant subjectivity, that relationship to the other in which the gift doesn’t calculate its influence—and the possibility of love; and a link today between this ‘libido of the other’ and writing” (“Sorties” 97).

It is difficult to find anywhere in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* the absence of writing the body. Morrison’s sensual writing commands the attention of the reader throughout the novel. The five slave men who had sex with calves while waiting for Sethe to select one of them as a husband indicates early on that this novel places a primary emphasis on corporeal existence. Baby Suggs’ endurance of the “nastiness of life” suggests that the maternal body in this story is devalued. Her eight children had six fathers. And Morrison explains that the “nastiness of life” to Baby Suggs was the freedom that slave owners took to play checkers with her children.

Sixo, the fifth man among the six male slaves, ran thirty miles and back every weekend just to see a woman he considered extraordinarily beautiful. He also danced at night among trees, alone, to “keep his bloodlines open.”

The bodily injuries that Sethe endured before she crossed the river into Ohio and freedom are among the most graphic and repulsive images perpetrated on a woman's body that can be imagined. One shudders at the physical deformation of Sethe's back after Schoolteacher's sons beat it with a leather whip. Six months pregnant with her last child, Sethe was snatched by Schoolteacher, the replacement for Mr. Garner after his death, because he had discovered a plan by the Garner slaves to escape to freedom.

Sethe was taken to the barn, where Schoolteacher's sons pressed all the milk out of her breasts, much as they might have done to a pregnant cow. Then, after Sethe told Mrs. Garner about this heinous act, the sons out of spite had beaten her back until it was nothing but bloody flesh. Her feet had also been beaten and mangled so that she could not run.

Sethe's miraculous escape in spite of this profound suffering and this murderous assault on her body was a testament to the stillness of her soul and her strength. She reached the edge of the river at night, only to realize that her baby was going to be born. With no one around, Sethe lay in the grass and presumed that she would die there. But when a young woman, Amy Denver, heard her moans, she stopped to see what was wrong with her.

Discovering her bloody stumps of feet, the stage of her pregnancy, and her bloody back, this young woman half carried Sethe to the lean-to of an old barn, mumbling all the way, "You goin' to die here." She said, "You got a chokecherry tree on your back (*Beloved* 79)."

But with Amy Denver's help, Sethe did not die but was delivered of a baby girl, whom she named "Denver" in honor of the woman who saved her life.

"Writing the body" in this novel includes almost every physical concern of the lives of the characters: the tentatively relaxed feeling that both Seth and Paul D feel after they first have sex, eighteen years after they knew each other as slaves at Sweet Home; the twenty-eight days of freedom that Sethe and her family knew in Cincinnati, filled with feasts and celebrations and sharing of stories by other slaves who had made it to this gathering place of freed slaves, and above all, Sethe's total, uninterrupted joy in her children are described in the most sensual language.

Beloved was "crawling already": Howard and Buglar had found companions; all of them lived in a real house where fear of detection was unknown; and above all, there was the preaching of Baby Suggs, who cried for an understanding of the holiness of the body.

Baby Suggs, an older slave woman who had finally obtained her freedom, was broken in body but very much alive in spirit. Sethe had shared a space with her in the slave quarters. Sethe admired this woman, who talked little but loved big, and in Baby Suggs, Sethe had a near-perfect model for a mother. Baby Suggs gave Sethe advice when Sethe needed it, and as the other female slave who had almost earned her freedom, she made plans with Sethe. Sethe had the opportunity of sharing life and learning wisdom from her mother-in-law. Marianne Hirsch, a contributing writer for the book *Reading Ruth*, edited by Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, compares the unusual attachment between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in the biblical Book of Ruth. Hirsch: "Only two literary accounts of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law love and affection came to mind as possible models: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the Book of Ruth" (*Reading Ruth* 311).

In Ohio, Baby Suggs preached in the clearing, a gathering place for the community of freed slaves. Baby Suggs did not preach about invisible grace or unattainable happiness on earth. Morrison says, "She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them that they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it" (*Beloved* 88 ff.).

Her words were heard by all who had settled into the community of black freed slaves: "Here in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love our flesh. They despise. They don't love your eyes; they'd just soon pick 'em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you!" (*Beloved* 89).

This kind of religious preaching connects the most basic concerns of religion with the most basic concerns of the body, because on the bodies of slaves are engraved the sacrileges of dehumanization. Baby Suggs herself, old and crippled, defies her bodily infirmities in order to preach holiness to the freed slaves in Cincinnati. In Baby Suggs' preaching is an overt connection of texts (preaching) and bodies (slaves who need to understand that their lives are holy).

It is apparent in the novel that Sethe had a kind of self-determination to be a good mother, and the horrors of her mother's fate she pushed out of memory. With Mrs. Garner as an accepting, affirming mother-figure, Sethe had relished the domestic tasks that she performed, and she had brought a sense of cheerfulness to all the slaves with

her desire to love her work and to be creative. It may be said that, with Mrs. Garner as a kind owner, and with Baby Suggs as a model of motherhood, her subjectivity constructed what she believed a good mother would be, and she sought the tools she needed in order to actualize her dream of living creatively in the world. She exulted in a kind of measured freedom, and with her body and mind she felt a sense of plenitude, a feeling of having enough personal freedom and a cultivation of her ingenuity to know the satisfaction of being a mother who “had enough milk for all,” as she described it when she finally made it to the free black community in Cincinnati.

It is also apparent in the novel that Baby Suggs had the most profound influence on Sethe’s perception of motherhood. Baby Suggs modeled black motherhood in the West African sense of “othermothers.” That is, everyone in the community had a responsibility for the care and growth of children, even if the children were not the biological issue of the same woman. The caring for the children of others fostered a sense of community among both African people and white Europeans. There was an unwritten imperative that all of the children of a community belonged to the community as a whole.

Patricia Hill Collins writes of this African tradition in her book *Black Feminist Thought*: “Motherhood—whether bloodmother, othermother, or community othermother—can be invoked by African American women as a symbol of power. Much of black women’s status in African-American communities stems not only from actions as mothers in black family networks but from contributions as community othermothers” (Collins 132).

In the novel *Beloved*, Sethe relies on her mother-in-law Baby Suggs to help her with childcare. Baby Suggs loves and nurtures Sethe’s children as if they were her own. When Baby Suggs is granted her freedom, she takes Howard, Buglar, and Beloved with her in the wagon to cross the river into Ohio. She bargains for a house where she and the children can live until Sethe and Halle, who plan to escape from the Garner plantation, may join them there. Baby Suggs is the sole mother for the children for two months.

Baby Suggs had earned the title of “holy” for her unorthodox religion: her conviction that God intended people to love and care for each other. As Morrison describes it, “Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart” (*Beloved* 88). And she celebrated her body and the bodies of all the freed slaves. This may be the most significant contribution of Baby Suggs to her daughter-in-law: her ability to celebrate the slave body.

It is appropriate to suggest at this stage in Sethe’s role as a mother that one would rightfully recall Julia Kristeva’s questions, “What do we know of the discourse of a mother?” In Sethe’s case, the question might be asked, “What do we know of the discourse of a slave mother?” How did the mind of a slave mother deal with the unconscious mind, the Other, the repressed? Who were those in her imaginary who helped Sethe develop an actualized self?

How would it be possible to cherish one’s subjectivity after being enslaved by a man who observed the actions of his slaves as a man would inspect cattle? Schoolteacher kept a notebook in which each page had two columns: “Human” and “Animal.” When Sethe saw his notebook and comprehended his sadistic obsession to inspect his slaves using these two categories, a harsh and fierce anger grew up within her. Her consciousness became flooded with both horror and guilt: horror that such a man as Schoolteacher would record the movements of all his slaves, and guilt that made Sethe question her own humanity.

Sethe was determined to be all that she believed that being a mother entitled her to be—not just a breeder of children for a white slave owner to use as beasts of burden, and certainly not a slave woman whose body wore out from debilitating physical labor. Sethe was determined to keep all the children that were hers and to love them the way Baby Suggs had taught her to love. She willfully forgot that slaves were property, that the rights of ownership which white people so prized gave her no right to claim her children as her own.

Sethe had the daring to perceive her body as a miracle of health and delight in living, to see herself as a loving, caring mother, to believe that she could be the delight of her husband for the duration of their lives together. Without being aware of it, Sethe had claimed her subjectivity as her own—her emotions, desires, hopes for the future, her daily thoughts, her conviction that she would know freedom. She was well on her way to what psychologists might term a meaningful construction of the self. And she represents the finest kind of example of what Julia Kristeva emphasized in her theories of the maternal body as the locus of signification so important to the children that the mother brings into the world.

Utilizing the tools of contemporary psychoanalytic thought, Kelly Oliver paraphrases and summarizes the significance of Kristeva for mothering and motherhood. Oliver explains Kristeva’s fundamental difference in this way, “Following Melanie Klein and in contrast to Freud and Lacan, Kristeva emphasizes the maternal function and its importance in the development of subjectivity and access to culture and language by insisting upon the significance of both the semiotic, or bodily functions, as well as the symbolic, the construction of the analytical processes of language” (www.ceec.vt.edu/feminism/kristeva.html).⁴ Oliver explains, “Kristeva is interested in the earliest development of subjectivity, prior to Freud’s oedipal situation or Lacan’s mirror stage” (Oliver). Kristeva includes the “semiotic” or bodily function as being equally as important as the “symbolic” or intellectual function in

any form of subjectivity. As Oliver explains, “Just as bodily drives are discharged into signification, the logic of signification is already operating within the materiality of the body” (Oliver). And in the mother’s womb, the developing embryo already is learning the logic of signification, or language.

In other words, Sethe, without being conscious of it, has claimed for herself the right to her own subjectivity and the prerogative as a mother to contribute to the development of the subjectivity of her children.

Sethe valued her body as few slaves had had the opportunity to do. Sethe’s life and the workings of her mind, her discourse, were those of an extraordinary slave mother, a mother determined to have some control over her life and the lives of her children.

But when Sethe realized that Schoolteacher perceived all the slaves as mere animals, there began to grow in Sethe’s mind and consciousness an intense anger, most of which she kept hidden to her own peril. She willingly closed off a part of herself that would have allowed her to nurture and teach Denver as Denver grew up. And she tried to kill all of her children when Schoolteacher came to Ohio to take her back to Sweet Home, a privilege that slave owners in some states were allowed by law. This murderous obsession on Sethe’s part killed a part of the freedom of her mind to adjust to tragedy and to recover from it in positive ways. In closing off a part of herself, she could not have access to her own subjectivity for years to come.

The maternal body was sacred to Sethe. She could not imagine that any human being would not have a sense of awe and wonder directed to the body of a woman who was carrying new life, about to bring new life into existence.

What she could neither understand nor articulate was the complete objectification of a slave woman’s body by the white men who enjoyed “playing checkers” with slaves, as Baby Suggs had called it, moving people around as if they were objects.

Sethe could not know or understand that Schoolteacher, like most white men and slave owners of his era, could not value the body of a pregnant slave woman because to him, she was not a woman but a piece of property. She was not a mother, only the breeder of more slaves.

In *Stabat Mater*, Julia Kristeva discusses the peculiar understanding of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a “virgin,” a virgin impregnated by a Holy Spirit and not a woman impregnated by male insemination. In the process of the creation of this story in the New Testament Book of Luke, Kristeva notes that Christianity equates the “maternal” with the “feminine.” That is, to be truly feminine, a woman must be a mother, preferably with the same kind of consecration with which Mary was privileged. And that woman must be the object of particular and special valuation, that is, a woman of white European descent. In the process of the development of this phenomenon, Kristeva suggests, Christianity fosters the “mother goddess” figure of ancient myth.

Sethe, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, could not know or begin to understand that as an African woman, she was not valued as a woman, much less as a mother, because the color of her skin signified darkness and evil, one that a white man could understand only in terms of her function as a slave.

Curiously, in her own way, Sethe functions as a mother goddess of another kind: one who assumed the prerogative of choosing life or death for her children. Toward the end of the novel when Sethe is trying to justify her attempts to kill her children, she wants Beloved to understand why, but because Beloved is already gone, Sethe verbalizes it to herself in this way:

“That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. . . .” (*Beloved* 251).

What Sethe also could not verbalize was the way in which, as Kristeva explains, that woman and religion are interrelated, and woman and textuality are interrelated. As Diane Jonte-Pace explains, “There is this other abyss that opens up between the body and what had been its inside; there is the abyss between the mother and the child. . . the child, whether he or she, is irremediably an other. . . a mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language—and it has always been so” (*Body/Text in Julia Kristeva* 8).

And thus the semiotic and the symbolic (language) maintain an intimate dance in the mother. Baby Suggs’ veneration for the body is intimately associated with her concept of motherhood. Yet, it is her preaching with words that marks her as “holy.”

After Sethe’s attempt to kill her children and her success in killing Beloved, she enters a phase of self-hatred and contempt that paralyze her actions and her thought. Julia Kristeva’s psychological insight suggests that mothers who are deprived of a sense of wholeness in their subjectivity, endure a period of “abjection,” self-hatred,

contempt, alienation, and disgust with the biological and psychological processes of mothering. They experience a physiological and psychological disconnection with their children.

After Sethe had succeeded in killing one of her own children so that this child would not be possessed ever again by Schoolteacher or any other slave owner, she closed off her emotions. Her two sons had run away when she grabbed the axe to try to kill all of her children. Baby Suggs, knowing that Sethe would embrace her baby and, in so doing, release her hands from the axe, placed Denver in Sethe's arms so that Sethe could breast-feed her.

Onlookers could only stare in alarm at what Sethe had done. Schoolteacher and his sons walked slowly away. Baby Suggs went to bed to contemplate color. And Sethe went to work every day as a cook in a restaurant in order to feed her family, but there was little access to her own subjectivity during this period in her life when she was as good as dead.

In this phase of her life, her murdered child, Beloved, comes back to the house outside Cincinnati to make life hell for Sethe. Everyone with whom Beloved comes in contact recognizes that she is the adult/child whom Sethe believed was put to rest forever. When Sethe understands that her dead child has come to life again, she quits her job to stay with her day and night, not realizing that the person she thinks is Beloved is an incubus come back to haunt and torture Sethe. She demands an exclusivity of Sethe that leaves all the other phases of Sethe's life null and void. She seduces Paul D; she is spiteful to Denver; she plays games with Sethe and eats with Sethe until both are gorged with food and, simultaneously, with a kind of self-indulgent self-love that fills Beloved's stomach so that she is pregnant with the consumption of Sethe's self.

All of Sethe's family are seriously affected by her attempt to kill her children. And the white people surrounding this family have no real way to understand or to connect with Sethe. Baby Suggs gives up trying to explain the plight of the slave and goes to bed to contemplate color for the remainder of her life. Baby Suggs had understood the suffering of a slave mother, and she had been like a mother to Sethe. But there was no remedy for the murderous actions of Sethe, and Baby Suggs simply isolated herself to die by absorbing herself in the most comforting indulgence of her mind: the contemplation of color. Color could not fight back; it could not condemn or threaten; but it could bathe the imagination in the beautiful.

The novel, however, has an ending that promises hope. Throughout the turbulent years of Sethe's life and her period of abjection, Denver was growing to be a young woman, and she experienced her own subjectivity as a creative, healing presence. She selected a clearing of trees where there was absolute quiet and peacefulness; there she nurtured her self. In Kristeva's terms, she "mothered the other within." She had a realistic understanding of her mother and of her ghost-sister and of Baby Suggs and Paul D. The women of this freed black community took it upon themselves to educate Denver with the result that she had two excellent teachers to introduce her to the educational process.

Denver had an open mind and a realistic temperament that allowed her to understand her mother's self-hatred and, at the same, it allowed her to nurture not only herself but her mother as well.

In the novel, the reader is also allowed entrance into the subjectivity of Baby Suggs, who had been crippled in body by her slave owners and disenchanted with her own experience of raising children and trying to nurture them in a slave culture. She had had seven children, but she had no way of knowing where they all were. She had been freed by Mr. Garner, a white man who understood kindness. And at the feast in the clearing, Baby Suggs' absolute joy in living had been laid out for all the freed slaves to see.

The reader is also allowed entrance into the subjectivity of Paul D, a man who had always loved Sethe, but in the failed attempt to escape from Schoolteacher, he had been captured by a man in Georgia, who kept him and any runaway slaves he could find in a prison underground. There, Paul D entered a phase of abjection in his life. He was treated like an animal, but he still had the consciousness of a human being, and he began to hate himself in earnest.

The reader is, further, allowed entrance into the subjectivity of Stamp Paid, the Negro man who ferried slaves from slavery into freedom in Ohio. He alone assists the reader in the reconstruction of the fatal attempt to escape from Schoolteacher. All of the slaves had contrived the plot a year before its deployment. As a result, many details of the plan had had to be changed, and Schoolteacher discovered the plot at the exact moment that it was deployed, resulting in the hanging of Sixo and Halle, the mutilation of Sethe's body, and the capture of Paul D by the man who kept him underground for sixteen years.

The characters who constitute the "family" that was begun as a slave family with Mr. and Mrs. Garner each contribute by their own thoughts, musings, emotions the broken narratives of all their lives. They constitute an "intersubjectivity" that allows each of the slaves the memories of their lives together, some gratifying and some horrifying.⁵

But their intersubjectivity also allows them the will and determination to value the sense of community that had been built with their slave-lives. For Sethe, this meant the grit and stubbornness to cling to life and to the lives

of her children; for Baby Suggs, it offered a momentary redemption in a life of misery; for Paul D, it offered the possibility that, if he could find her, he and Sethe could have a life together. For Stamp Paid, it was a dismal reminder of the disintegration of the lives of Africans in spite of all his efforts to ferry them to freedom.

Notes

¹ The edition of Beloved used in writing this paper is the edition published by Penguin in 1987.

² For a fuller explanation of Lacan's psychological theories and their relationship to the writing of texts, please see the following: "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the 'I' as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," anthologized in The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, edited by Vincent B. Leitch.

³ The construction of a self in contemporary psychological thought depends upon the acute awareness of a thinking being who acknowledges the ability of the mind to work in tandem with both external forces and individual consciousness in order to understand *dasein*, or "being in the world," a term made significant by such phenomenological philosophers as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. These philosophers were influenced by Soren Kierkegaard's belief that "the doctrine of truth as subjectivity is not the cognitive self but the ethically existing self" (Phenomenology, Edited by Joseph J. Kockelmans, Doubleday, 1967).

⁴ For a thorough and extensive understanding of Kristeva's views of the semiotic and the symbolic, the reader is directed to the following sources: David Crownfield, editor, Body/Text in Julia Kristeva. Albany: State University of New York, 1992. Julia Kristeva. Tales of Love. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. Julia Kristeva. Desire in Language. Edited by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

In Stabat Mater, for example, Kristeva explains the splitting of the mother: "There is this other abyss that opens up between the body and the child. . .the child, whether he or she, is irremediably an other. . .a mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language—and it has always been so" (Tales of Love 260).

⁵ For a more precise definition of "intersubjectivity," the reader is referred to pages 167-182 in Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretations, edited by Joseph J. Kockelmans, Doubleday, 1967).

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