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**The Maternal Space as Boundless:
Finding Liberation through Child Preservation in Toni Morrison's**

Beloved, Sula, and The Bluest Eye

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Researching motherhood in literature provides an insightful, interesting, and uninhibited look into cultural traditions, social expectations, and racial differences. This is especially true regarding the African and Anglo American maternal models. The maternal instinct of protecting children is present in both of these cultures, but radically different in approach and execution. The white mother's actions and decisions of *how* and *when* to practice child preservation are controlled by white society and white patriarchy. She exists in a confined maternal space. In contrast, the black mother is free to act and decide how and when to protect her children. She follows her own reason regardless of societal and patriarchal expectations. This is because black history instilled in her a driving force to ensure first the physical, then mental and spiritual survival of her children. She exists in a liberated maternal space.

In studying white and black feminist scholars such as Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Rich, Carol Gilligan, Patricia Hill Collins, Andrea O'Reilly and Sara Ruddick, it became apparent the differing social, cultural, and patriarchal perspectives on white and black mothering. To exemplify my findings, I applied these theories to Toni Morrison's Beloved, Sula, and The Bluest Eye. First, I began reading articles, chapters, and books pertaining to this topic. Second, I formulated three arguments and chose the most thought-provoking to be my thesis. Third, I created thorough, extensive outlines and began the writing process. After many conferences and email exchanges with my advisor and outside reader, my drafts improved drastically. The process was challenging yet fulfilling. I discovered myself as a writer and as a communicator in the English discipline. Furthermore, I was fascinated to explore black motherhood in theory and literature.

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Although I am not yet a mother, I am well aware of the social expectations placed upon this role. White feminist scholars such as Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Rich, and Carol Gilligan have demonstrated that Western society defines motherhood as another form of white patriarchal oppression. In contrast, black feminist scholars and writers such as Patricia Hill Collins and Toni Morrison have shown that African American culture defines motherhood as a site of black female empowerment with its primary objective to raise empowered children. The slave era and proceeding periods of injustice contributed to the development of this ideology. In addition, scholars such as Sara Ruddick and Andrea O'Reilly have shown that the practice of child preservation is the first and most crucial step in the African American maternal model. But how does this practice directly affect the maternal space?

While, Chodorow, Rich, Gilligan, Collins, O'Reilly and Ruddick, among others, have greatly contributed to the discourses of white and African American motherhood, none of these feminist theorists fully explores how the practice of child preservation affects the African American and/or white maternal space. In this essay, I want to demonstrate how in Toni Morrison's fiction (in particular), black mothers act freely to preserve their children and this model of motherhood contrasts sharply with the white normative ideal. Morrison's empowering construction of motherhood, therefore, offers a crucial alternative view of the oppressive discourse of white mothering in patriarchal culture. Despite the fact that the white normative discourse of motherhood has become less restrictive for women over the years, the underlining cultural discourse of mothering remains constricting and confining. The African American maternal model and its

practice of extreme child preservation can teach white females that motherhood is a site of power and resistance against patriarchal oppression.

I.

The major Morrison critics such as Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, Diane Gillespie, Missy Dehn Kubitschek, Jane Kuenz, and Jennifer Gillan, among others, provide enriching arguments to the discourses of black womanhood and motherhood in Morrison's fiction. Demetrakopoulos argues the dangers of the maternal bond when it obviates the mother's sense of self, especially in regards to the enslaved mother in Morrison's Beloved. She claims Sethe must "break the bonds of guilt" carried from the slave era in order to reach self-actualization or else she will assume a confined maternal space. Gillespie and Kubitschek criticize the Euro-centric literary models mostly used in women-centered psychology and argue that Morrison's Sula offers a view of the development of the black female self through the mother-daughter relationship *and* through the "self-in-community" dynamic. This challenges the traditional psychological analysis of white women, who are frequently bound by conservative social relationships. Kuenz and Gillan examine Morrison's The Bluest Eye as a commentary on historical/cultural displacement within the discourse of black motherhood. They argue that white culture pervades the black female body, which destroys the mother-daughter dyad as seen in Pauline and Pecola.

While these critics incorporate concepts such as ancestral memory, communal motherwork, self-actualization, and the mother-daughter relationship in their arguments of mothering in Morrison, none fully link the practice of child preservation to the free black maternal space. In this essay, I want to expand on their critical analyses to define child preservation and to prove that this practice liberates the black mother in Morrison's fiction.

Black mothers are empowered to act freely in preserving their children because, unlike white mothers, they resist and defy the white dominant cultural standpoint placed upon them. According to Collins, it is essential for black mothers to redefine the negative conceptions of black womanhood. During the slave era “controlling images” such as the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the Jezebel were created to categorize and objectify black women. Particular and presupposed characteristics were used to form these “controlling images” in order to oppress black women and then, in turn, used to validate that oppression (67-72). Collins states, “From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary pop culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African American women has been fundamental to Black women’s oppression” (7). It is imperative to the endurance and empowerment of African American women to recognize and restructure these subjugating evaluations. As Collins states, “Black women’s ability to forge these individual, unarticulated, yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint is key to Black women’s survival” (26). These re-conceptualized viewpoints reiterated by traditional experiences in womanhood as well as in motherhood, influence self, communal, and societal identities. The liberation black women find in self-defining themselves from what Morrison terms, “the ancient properties” and “the funk,” which are “traditional conceptions of black womanhood” and “traditional black values” respectively, not only empowers themselves and their ancestors, but also empowers and preserves their children (O’Reilly 20). African American maternal ancestors were not restricted to the private sphere because the

institution of slavery publicized their womanhood, which allowed for the intervention of patriarchy. Therefore, in redefining black female identity from the white dominant social ideology, black motherhood becomes a site of liberation in preserving children's lives and raising empowered generations.

In redefining the negative conceptions of black womanhood, black mothers authorize themselves to preserve children in ways they see fit. Because of this, the maternal role is extremely respected by and fundamental to black culture. According to O'Reilly, the black community and the greater black population consider motherhood the prime reason for their welfare and empowerment. The heart of black motherhood, "in both practice and thought, is how to preserve, protect, and more generally empower black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete"(O'Reilly 4). The construction of black mothering as powerful, valuable, and liberating incorporates Collins' framework emphasizing black female self-definition and the concept of communal motherwork. Black women who participate in communal motherwork are liberated mothers in the sense that it is a collective enterprise to preserve and empower children. African American mothers are able to share childcare responsibilities, divulge maternal emotions, and partake in a female unity, which may not rely on any sort of patriarchal presence at all. The term "othermothering" refers to women caring for a child who is not biologically related. The term "community mothering" is defined as women who look after the community, who are normally "past their childbearing years," and who have previously assumed the role of "othermothers" (O'Reilly 5). According to Stanlie James, these practices were derived from West African societies based upon a shared way of life and raising children was

deemed a communal responsibility. During the slave era, these notions were expanded upon with the commoditization of black women and integrated as a method of survival in black culture (44-54). As Arlene Edwards argues, “The familial instability of slavery engendered the adaptation of communality in the form of fostering children whose parents, particularly mothers, had been sold. This tradition of communality gave rise to the practice of othermothering. The survival of the concept is inherent to the survival of Black people as a whole...since it allowed for the provision of care to extended family and non blood relations” (80). These practices of shared parenting disrupt the American and European middle to upper-class ideology that the nuclear family is essential in every household. In white middle-class culture, it is assumed that the woman’s space is principally domestic and that motherhood encompasses nearly all of the childbearing responsibilities. The man, therefore, primarily occupies the public sphere of “political and economic discourse.”

The absence of communal motherwork in the white maternal model restricts the mother to the domestic/private sphere and the father to the public sphere. Chodorow discusses how as far as the early capitalist period in the United States and its formation of the “moral mother,” Western society has structured heterosexual households into sex-segregated gender roles. Consequently, this has established motherhood as oppressive and perpetuates male dominance (5-9). Chodorow states, “That women mother is a fundamental organizational feature of the sex-gender system: It is basic to the sexual division of labor and generates a psychology and ideology of male dominance as well as an ideology about women’s capacities and nature” (208). In response to this “asymmetrical organization of parenting,” Chodorow analyzes the Freudian account,

more specifically the Oedipus complex, and presents the male/female model of parenting as a solution. This solution is defined as dual parenting or as men *and* women being present physically, mentally, and emotionally when raising the child. She argues that it is psychologically beneficial for both parents to actively participate in childhood development (215-219).

Chodorow reinforces that sex-segregated roles oppress white motherhood, negatively affects the practice of child preservation, and creates a confined white maternal space. In contrast, the black mother assuming both private and public spheres enhances the maternal practice of child preservation because without white patriarchal confinements, child preservation becomes a free maternal act. This establishes the black mother's existence in a liberated maternal space. Collins states, "Because the construct of family/household emerged with the growth of the modern state and is rooted in assumptions about discrete public and private spheres, nuclear families characterized by sex-segregated gender roles are less likely to be found in African-American communities, where political life is radically different" (47). This is evident in the film, *The Long Walk Home*. Set in 1960's during the Civil Rights movement, the African American maternal character, Odessa Cotter (played by Whoopi Goldberg), transgresses both private and public boundaries. She participates maternally and economically for the survival of her family. In contrast, the white maternal character, Miriam Thompson (played by Sissy Spacek), exists solely in the domestic realm for the majority of the film. Odessa enters the public sphere to financially preserve her children whereas Miriam's husband is the solitary provider. This forces Miriam to exist only in the private sphere. Therefore, this

defines Odessa's household "matrifocal," which is female centered and more of a gender equal family unit.

According to Morrison's maternal theory, the practices of remembering and passing down ancestral memory defines and furthers child preservation. The re-articulation of female identity and the female community are all made possible by what Sethe terms, the "rememories" of African American history. The practices of remembering and passing down African American cultural values constitute the significance and role of the "motherline." According to O'Reilly, "If black children are to survive they must know the stories, legends, and myths of their ancestors. In African American culture, women are the keepers of the tradition: they are the cultural bearers who mentor and model the African American values essential to the empowerment of black children and culture" (12). Through the oral tradition, African American mothers connect with their own motherline and with their children. Mothers teach children their black history by passing down ancestral memory. This is part of child preservation. Black mothers equip children with the warnings, encouragement, and authority needed for survival. In referring to matrilineal heritage, mothers liberate themselves from pains in the past and empower children with the same means to do so. This is through creative instruments such as: story, song, dance, and art. As Alice Walker states In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens, "So many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories...I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded" (179). Black mothers are the carriers of black culture and share the stories that are essential to self-authenticity for themselves as well as their

children. Therefore, in remembering and passing down “herstories,” black mothers liberate themselves while preserving their children.

Morrison argues that story telling is also one of the “ancient properties,” which are defined as the traditional channels of black expression. These elements, when present in the mother-child relationship, further the success of the African American maternal model. Sue Monk Kidd explores this “ancient property” in her novel The Secret Life Of Bees. She demonstrates a black sisterhood united in sharing stories, specifically the myth or legend of the “Our Lady of Chains.” As exemplified in this novel, the traditional act of story telling serves to alleviate and validate pain. As Kidd states, “Isak Dinesen, who wrote *Out of Africa*, once said, ‘All sorrows can be borne if we put them in a story or tell a story about them.’ Ever since I first read that line, I’ve carried it with me” (Afterword 8). In Bees, story telling benefits the older maternal figures as well as the young protagonist. This can be applied directly to the mother-daughter relationship. In sharing memories and cultural values, the mother releases grief and teaches the child not to fear pain in the process. Therefore, the mother assumes a free maternal space and preserves the child while establishing cultural connection. In addition, the “ancient properties” position the black mother in both the private and public spheres. Morrison states, “Our history as Black women is the history of women who could build a house *and* have some children and there was no problem...It is not a question, it’s not a conflict. You don’t have to give up anything. You *choose* your responsibilities” (Taylor-Gunthrie qtd in O’Reilly 20). Remembering the strength and duality of black female ancestors inspires and empowers future black female generations. Furthermore, the “ancient properties” teach the child a black history of endurance. Walker asks, “How was the creativity of the

black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist” (173). Walker implies the amazing resilience of black women expression. This is important for the mother to remember and pass down to the child. Not only does it teach black history, but also it liberates the mother and preserves the child.

In conjunction with the “ancient properties,” Morrison introduces the “funk” as part of cultural bearing. Again, this is important for both the mother and child. The “funk” is indirectly identified in Morrison’s novels unlike the “ancient properties.” The existence in the text depends upon vivid imageries such as color, taste, and smell (O’Reilly 24). These agencies highlight the characters’ past, culture, moods, artistic natures, disconnect from the motherline, and maternal/female identities. Later in discussing The Bluest Eye, I will argue how the presence and absence of the “ancient properties” and the “funk” alter the black maternal space.

In Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis, the importance of ancestral memory for the preservation and empowerment of black children is specifically examined and applied to the mother-daughter relationship. In this context, African American motherhood contrasts yet again with Anglo-American motherhood. According to Joseph and Lewis, issues of maternal respect and daughter independence were greatly prevalent in African American relationships based on the mother’s desire to assure the daughter with survival skills; whereas in white culture, marriage is the normative approach taught to women in order to “get ahead.” Joseph states, “There is a tremendous amount of teaching transmitted by Black mothers to their daughters that enables them to survive, exist, succeed, and be

important to and for the Black communities...Black daughters are actually ‘taught to hold the Black community together’” (qtd. in O’Reilly 13). The African American mother-daughter relationship is an empowering dynamic through its teachings of the “motherline.” The survival of the community, the culture, and succeeding generations rely on this connection. If there is a disconnection, however, the results are detrimental.

II.

Morrison's Beloved, Sula, and The Bluest Eye represent the black mother following and rupturing the African American maternal model. Because black history has instilled the will of survival in black mothers, Sethe, Eva, and Mrs. Macteer find liberation through the practice of child preservation and thus, exist in a boundless maternal space. This radically differs from the white normative discourse of motherhood as described by Chodorow and Rich. I will examine Pauline Breedlove's representation of the ruptured black mother to emphasize the freedom found when keeping to the African American maternal model. Because of Pauline's break from the African American maternal model and desire to assimilate white culture, her children (specifically Pecola) are destroyed and she is positioned in a confined maternal space.

In Morrison's novels, the settings have an immense historical relevance and are valuable in understanding African American culture, family, and mother/child relationship. Firstly, the act of murder in Beloved is based on a factual account. Because of the Fugitive Act of 1850, Margaret Garner murdered her children in 1856 to prevent them from being re-instituted into slavery ("Stampede of Slaves"). In this novel, the black maternal identity is re-articulated to sustain freedom from white patriarchy in the slave era. Secondly, in Sula World War I veterans suffering from depression and poverty signify a disconcerting, distrusting post war era. As a result, the African American mother and daughter must re-define their female identity. Lastly, The Bluest Eye is set during 1941, at the end of the Great Depression and when the United States entered World War II "against racialized forms of nationalism abroad" (Gillan 284). Two female characters exhibit radically different maternal identities and question the "United States'

own conflicts over race purity [that] were displaced” (Gillan 284). These periods of injustice, destitution, and unpredictability have instilled the will of survival in the African American people, and more specifically, the African American mother. Because of this history, black mothering focuses on safeguarding their children in the most extreme sense. Thus, child preservation is central to Morrison’s work.

Ruddick coins the term, preservative love, to describe the highest form of maternal child-protection. She states that child preservation “does not require enthusiasm or even love” from the mother, but “it means to see vulnerability and to respond to it with care rather than abuse [or] indifference” (Maternal Thinking 19). In African American history, “racial ethnic children’s lives have long been held in low regard” and the right of physical survival was assumed for white, middle class children (Collins qtd. in O’Reilly 8). Because of this, the African American mother and the greater African American community are forced to unite in order to preserve or “keep safe whatever is vulnerable and valuable” in the child (Ruddick 80). Therefore, the child’s physical survival is the foremost objective for the African American mother. According to O’Reilly, “Securing food and shelter, struggling to build and sustain safe neighborhoods is what defines both the meaning and experience of black women’s motherwork” (32). The periods in, but not limited to, Morrison’s novels are a part of a dehumanizing African American past and thus, the majority of maternal characters practice preservative love. Because preservative love is the supreme act of child protection, Sethe, Eva, and Mrs. Macteer find freedom in its practice. They are liberated from any maternal restriction enforced by the white normative discourse of motherhood and therefore, exist in a boundless maternal space.

In Morrison's Beloved, slavery is the main character. The institution rooted in African American history provides the foundation for the novel's tribulations. Sethe's experiences at the Sweet Home plantation mark her, physically and psychologically for the entirety of the text. Although Sethe re-articulates her female identity from the dominant white standpoint found mainly in schoolteacher, she solely defines herself as a mother. Sethe does not self-actualize. The narrator states, "For the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home. Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like" (140). Understandingly, Sethe is consumed only with thoughts of her children. Even after she escapes Sweet Home's repression, the formation of her self-identity is restrained incessantly. Sethe suppresses little of what she remembers about her "motherline," she lacks communal involvement after Beloved's death, and she displays a disconnected relationship with Denver; all of which provide a confining space for Sethe's self-actualization.

Morrison creates Sethe as the enslaved mother, representing the many women whose stories of motherhood are "disremembered and unaccounted for" because of the dislocation of families through commoditization and sale. According to O'Reilly, "The historical trauma of motherline loss is represented through the character of Beloved while the psychological trauma of this loss is conveyed through the character Sethe" (85). The presence of Beloved in human form causes Sethe to remember her own mother and feel a reconnection to the "motherline." For example, the first time Sethe sees Beloved she states, "Not since she was a baby girl, being cared for by the eight-year-old girl who

pointed out her mother to her, had she had an emergency that unmanageable” (51). Beloved’s embodiment of disengaged matrilineal heritage reveals Sethe’s ruptured self through psychological loss. The suppression of that loss creates an imprisonment for Sethe, but it is only through her attempt to preserve her children that she can find liberation. She tells Beloved, “My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma’am is. They stopped me from getting us there, but they didn’t stop from you getting here. Ha ha. You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma’am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one” (203). Sethe’s own desire to be a daughter, a “good girl” to her mother is freely expressed to Beloved. And through this verbal explanation of maternal nurturance and preservation, Sethe is liberated to reclaim both her own mother and herself as daughter.

Breast-feeding is a main practice of maternal nurturance and child preservation in Beloved. It is one of the earliest and most vital connections between Sethe and her children. Morrison demonstrates Sethe’s production and deliverance of milk to represent her innate responsibility of sustaining her children’s survival. In addition, her children’s dependence and consumption of milk exemplifies their natural need for Sethe’s body. According to theorists Benedek, Fairbairn, and to some degree Freud and Klein, “the infant’s oral relationship to the mother and her breast” contributes to infantile maternal dependence (Chodorow 66). The infant’s primary, immediate need for food and human contact is satisfied by the “giving and succoring on the part of the mother” (Chodorow 66). A dependent relationship quickly forms for the child and his/her need for the mother becomes “absolute” (Chodorow 67). Therefore, breast-feeding links Sethe and her

children beyond their control. However, what happens to this practice of child preservation when Sethe is unable to or prevented from nurturing her children? During the slave era, black women were treated as commodities and exploited through the practice of wet nursing. Slave women were forced to breast-feed white children and rarely permitted to breast-feed their own children. This creates physical and psychological trauma for Sethe and her children.

Two major events demonstrate breastfeeding as a practice of extreme child preservation. The first concerns Sethe as a daughter. She experiences a milk-deprived childhood because her mother is too busy working and her Nan feeds the white babies first. As she states, “Nan had to nurse the whitebabies and me too because Ma’am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was not nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is like to be without milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left” (200). From the child perspective, Sethe suffers the disrupted infantile maternal dependence. This memory demonstrates the appropriation of slave mothering and represents child preservation as a means for survival.

The next incident concerns Sethe as a mother. At Sweet Home, white men hold her down and steal her milk. As she states, “I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby” (200). Sethe’s milk is drained from her body by and for white men. It is arguably the worst violation for a black mother. The narrator describes the incident as “two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on [her] breast, the other one holding [her] down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up” (70). Because of this

violently intimate exchange, Sethe's breasts are portrayed consistently as a wound. They no longer represent the pleasures of womanhood and the nurturance of motherhood, but rather the loss of these two identities. Sethe frequently mentions the weight of her breasts to signify the immense amount of guilt and pain she carries. In a sexual moment with Paul D, the narrator states, "the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands" (21). In holding Sethe's breasts, Paul D temporarily gives her the opportunity to reclaim and unburden her female/maternal identities. At this instant, she is relieved from the responsibilities of preserving and maintaining her children's survival. Thus, Sethe experiences the disrupted maternal infantile dependence as a daughter and as a mother. Both of these events symbolize the denial of black motherhood to slave women and establish Sethe's maternal practice of child preservation as a means for survival.

Beloved's reincarnation into the flesh form results from the sequence of events following Sethe's escape from Sweet Home. The repression of Sethe's female identity resurfaces as she repeatedly attempts to preserve Beloved. In Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, Sethe's flight from Sweet Home is noted as an "escape from slavery [that] was not really for herself. Her swollen breasts and the baby kicking within pressed her onward to the baby waiting for her milk. Biological necessity made her create a life that would allow her children to grow up" ("Maternal Bonds" 54). Although critics have argued the self-inhibiting nature of Sethe's maternal bonds, she occupies a boundless maternal state by acting freely to secure the survival of her unborn child.

Sethe's maternal identity encompasses the only aspect in her life where she is free, free to decide and determine what is best for the preservation of her children. Because Sethe occupies a fluid sphere to preserve her children, this maternal liberation is

made possible. Demetrakopoulos adds, “Sethe attempts to return the babies to perhaps a collective mother body, to devour them back into the security of womb/tomb death much as a mother cat will eat her babies as the ultimate act of protection” (53). Although Demetrakopoulos argues that Sethe’s maternal identity creates a restricting space, it is because of her maternal identity that she exists in a boundless state. Through mothering, Sethe is able to protect her children and re-articulate her womanhood. If schoolteacher reclaimed Sethe and her children, her fluid maternal sphere would have been eradicated and white patriarchy would have defined her as “breeder.” For Sethe and for the African American culture, the survival of black children during slavery must be achieved by any means necessary.

The concepts of “othermothering” and “community mothering” arise at 124 where Sethe retrieves to and where her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, is the dominant maternal figure. In the short period of communal contentment and safety, “124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. Where not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long. Strangers rested there while children tried on their shoes. Messages were left there, for whoever needed them was sure to stop in one day soon” (86-86). This site of communal involvement provided a sense of African American empowerment, especially during the transformative period of slavery and liberation. In the midst of the self-uncertainty, Baby Suggs’ home and perspective provided a maternal nurturance for those both related and non-related. She states, “More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize” (Beloved 89). Baby Suggs provided words for the empowerment of the African American identity

in self and in communal unity. The visit from schoolteacher obliterated everything that Baby Suggs represented and Sethe relied upon. The damaging oppression that came with him stripped Baby Suggs' as "othermother," dismantled 124's empowered "matrifocal" community. In addition, it stimulated Sethe to preserve her children in the most extreme sense.

Although the neighboring and inhabiting unity of 124 was destroyed by Sethe's act of infanticide, Sethe found liberation through maternity to perform the ultimate act of protection. Morrison's description of the incident perpetuates this idea of a free mental, maternal space. She states, "Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything it was No...She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them...Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on" (163). In Native American folklore, the hummingbird symbolizes resurrection and the warrior in reincarnated form. Therefore, the hummingbirds represent Sethe as the maternal warrior, leading her children to resurrection and a preserved state. In addition, the hummingbirds' rapid wings represent freedom in flight and illustrate Sethe's freedom to decide for her children.

It is very likely that if Sethe hadn't attempted infanticide, her children would have been sold and forced into slavery. Although critics argue Sethe's love is "too- thick," her decision to preserve her children occurred in a boundless, maternal space. She finds liberation through her "flight" and her claim to safeguard her children. According to O'Reilly, "[Sethe] demands that she, and not schoolteacher, will determine the fate of her

children. Her decision to protect her children through death is, for Sethe, hers to make because, as a mother, she is responsible for assessing and providing for the well-being of her children” (136). Sethe’s own painful “motherline” placed her in a fluid maternal space, which gave her the freedom to kill Beloved in order to preserve her in death. According to Collins, “*Beloved* directly confronts the issue of how slavery impoverished the ability to love and how reclaiming love constituted an essential step toward freedom (Black Sexual Politics 60). In an era where white patriarchy declared ownership over and commoditized the black population, black mothers obtained liberation through the maternal act of reclaiming, preserving, and ultimately freeing their children.

In Morrison’s Sula, Eva’s maternal disposition raises concerns in the critical community because of the maternal space she acquires. Her actions towards her children disrupt the dominant ideological conviction that mothers exist in a confined, delegated, private sphere. O’Reilly states, “Eva in particular distresses readers because the maternal power she claims upsets the comfortable notions of maternal powerlessness” and in addition, Eva has been condemned for embodying the immoral and unconventional matriarch (147). Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek present a counterargument and state, “Of the three Peace Women, Eva has the most capacity for authenticity in caretaking. The extremity of her early life as a caregiver forced her to recognize her own as well as others’ needs. She neither leaves the community permanently nor compromises herself in her relation with others” (38). Eva’s history of abandonment and poverty places her in a position that cannot be examined under the dominant ideology of motherhood. The sex-segregated roles projected by the Eurocentric view do not apply to Eva because she must assume both private and public spheres to financially preserve her children.

Consequently, she too subsists in a boundless maternal state and finds liberation in the choices she makes to preserve her children.

Morrison's characterization of Eva as "othermother" and "community mother" enforces the notion that she is a nurturer and preserver of the black population. Her position as landlord invites and creates a safe haven for the black community. Gillespie and Kubitschek state, "Eva's efforts extend from her immediate family to the larger community...Eva's house becomes a kind of extended family when she takes on the matriarchal role...The house becomes a kind of social center for men...Eva takes in homeless waifs...she becomes a connective force in the community, her traditional goodness a generative force for those around her" (35). These descriptions construct Eva as an empowered maternal figure, who is free to delegate both related and non-related individuals residing in the community. Her maternal space is therefore, fluid and she finds freedom in preserving both this "matrifocal" society and in deciding her children's welfare.

The preservation of future generations is imperative to the empowerment of the African American culture; and the black mother finds liberation in delivering her children to safety. Eva's decision to murder her son, Plum, because he has descended into heroin addiction challenges the dominant ideology of motherhood. She acts with the freedom of the maternal space she exists in and releases her son from a life of pain in order to preserve him in an eternal aftermath.

Morrison portrays the beginning of the scene with Eva cradling, "rocking" Plum in complete maternal anguish. And then, "[Plum] opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of

baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said...where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight” (47). A close reading of the passage depicts Plum in a sanctified domain of solace, provided for him by Eva. He is comforted by her “great wing,” which is “blessing” him with the performance of preservative love. The holy images of wetness and light perpetuate this idea that Eva has provided a reincarnation for Plum, a baptism into safety. Similar to *Sethe* and *Beloved*, Eva’s act preserves Plum by restoring his life through death. In comparison to *Sethe*, “The images of ritual and renewal promise a rebirth from death. Eva kills Plum so that he may be reborn...When a child is in pain, the first desire and duty of the mother is to put an end to that child’s suffering” (O’Reilly 149). Eva’s love for Plum situates her in a boundless maternal space, where she is free to salvage her son by any means necessary. And it is this very liberty to preserve Plum that perplexes critics who view Eva under the dominant ideology of mothering.

The relationship between Eva and Plum contradicts many of the dominant theories analyzing the mother and son relationship. Gilligan argues, “For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity. For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on the progress of individuation” (8). The dominant ideology demands that male children separate from the mother in order to fulfill their masculine roles in a patriarchal culture. Consequently, stereotypical gender roles are enforced through the son’s rejection of the primary female in his life and her compliance to the agreement. The maternal space becomes more constrained by the mother yielding to patriarchal social

demands and by the son severing from the “motherline.” O’Reilly states, “In giving the name Peace to Plum and having him engage in war, Morrison underscores the problematic of mother-son connection in a patriarchal society.” The formation of a respectable African American identity relies upon “connecting to the motherline, keeping the values of the funk and ancient properties intact, and receiving the motherlove that fosters self-love” (151). Instead of following the dominant ideology of motherhood, Eva assumes a boundless maternal space and claims the responsibility to decide what is best for her son. Eva finds liberation through preserving Plum in death because of her freedom to save him from and criticize the white patriarchal social system.

In Morrison, motherhood is a site of black empowerment. As argued, child preservation is the first and most essential step in the African American maternal model. Sethe and Eva accomplish this through their liberated maternal actions. They do not follow rules or expectations placed upon mothers, which are normally found in Western society. Therefore, Sethe and Eva exist in a free maternal space while white mothers normally express confinement. What happens, however, when the African American mother fails to preserve her children?

In The Bluest Eye, the Breedloves represent a rupture in the African American maternal model. Pauline assimilates the white dominant ideology of beauty and the family. She demonstrates a detachment from community and a disconnection with the motherline. In addition, she lacks the “ancient properties” and the “funk.” Consequently, Pauline fails in preserving her children and assumes a confined maternal space.

In the preface, Morrison provides three versions of the Dick-and-Jane story. The first is in perfect structure and represents the dominant ideological white, middle-class

family. For example, “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house” (3). According to Jane Kuenz, the organized Dick-and-Jane preface “is a visible model for happiness and thus implicitly accuses those whose lives do not match up. In 1941, and no less so today, this would include a lot of people. Even so, white lower-class children can at least more easily imagine themselves posited within the story’s realm of possibility. For black children this possibility might require a double reversal or negation”(422). Kuenz argues the well-known Dick-and-Jane story indicates an archetypal family with a negative connotation. The second version is without punctuation or capitalization. For example, “Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house” (4). This represents the flawed yet somewhat intact family. The final version is without punctuation, capitalization, and spacing. It begins, “Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhite” (4). This demonstrates a complete collapse in the family unit. The Breedloves are representative of the third model. According to O’Reilly, “Families like the Breedloves...can never be a Dick and Jane family though they will continually aspire to achieve the ideal and forever measure their own selves against it” (48). Therefore, the most typologically chaotic version foretells Pauline’s rupture in the African American maternal model and the suffering of her children.

Morrison presents Pauline as isolated, discontent, and violent. She is removed from her womanhood, motherhood, wifeness, and black cultural. This is primarily a result of motherline disconnection. Because of this, her children are denied what she lacks: ancestral memory, especially the “ancient properties” and the “funk.” Pauline’s

relocation is predominantly the reason for her detachment. She moves from her hometown in the rural south to the north in Lorain, Ohio. Pauline expresses her isolation. She states, “Everything changed. It was hard to get to know folks up here, and I missed my people. I weren’t used to so much white folks...they was everywhere—next door, downstairs, all over the streets—and colored folks few and far between. Northern colored folks was different too...No better than whites for meanness” (117). Because Pauline is removed geographically from her hometown, she lacks connection to the motherline, communal involvement, and the remembrance of cultural components. Her “lonest time” in Lorain facilitates this rupture and she finds a privatized solace at the movie theater. She states, “White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard” (123). Morrison illustrates how the white patriarchal dominant ideology of beauty and family dangerously saturates society through literature and entertainment. Consequently, Pauline replaces the “ancient properties” with the standards of white culture. Her female/maternal identity is articulated *for her*. According to Kuenz, “In the absence of alternate images which might validate and endorse a kind of virtue not tied to physical beauty...*and* in the absence of a network of family and friends, especially women friends, whose own lives would provide a differing model and the context in which to erect her own, Pauline succumbs to the ‘simple pleasures’ of ‘black-and-white images projected through a ray of light’ and ‘curtailing freedom in every way’ (425-26 emphasis in text). Pauline’s distance from her family and friends signify an altered self-perception and an inability to maintain connection to the motherline. Her African American cultural values are skewed, which

allows her to willingly and desirably consume the white dominant culture. As a result, she neglects the African American maternal model, fails to preserve her children, and enters a restricted maternal space.

The detachment from ancestral memory is further demonstrated through Pauline's loss of the "funk." In the novel, Morrison defines funk as "the funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of a wide range of emotions" (68). This suggests it is the truth of a person's heritage and self. With Pauline internalizing the restraining conceptions of African American women created by the dominant culture, she falsifies herself and her history. As stated earlier, "funk" is illustrated through taste, smell and especially, color. In the beginning of Pauline's relationship with Cholly, she describes having sex as enjoyable. As she states, "I begin to feel those little bits of color floating up into me—deep in me. That streak of green from the june-bug light, the purple from the berries trickling along my thighs, Mama's lemonade yellow runs sweet in me" (131). Later in the novel, an older Pauline describes having sex with Cholly negatively. Her rainbow has disappeared, representing her failure to feel pleasure. In this respect, the absence of color demonstrates Pauline's self-disconnection and departure from African American matrilineal heritage. Pauline's attempt to internalize the white dominant culture results in her loss of "spontaneity, sexuality, and passion" (Holloway 14). This has a direct effect on Pauline's children and especially alters her mother/daughter relationship with Pecola.

In assimilating with the white dominant culture, Pauline finds solace at the Fisher house. In this context, her rejection of the African American maternal model is fully explored and presented. Pauline's employment as a domestic servant obliterates and

substitutes her black culture with the white culture. She fails to re-define the controlling images projected upon black women, as Collins advises, but rather becomes known as the “ideal servant.” Because of her severance from the motherline, community, culture, and family, “such a role filled practically all of her needs” (127). As the narrator states, “More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like afterthoughts” (127). Pauline only finds “power, praise, and luxury” at the Fisher house (128). She privatizes and idolizes this other world, investing all of her energy, love, and self into the Fisher household. She wants the dominant white, middle-class nuclear family to define her. This is exemplified in their renaming her “Polly.” This nickname represents Pauline’s desire to be “white.” According to Jennifer Gillan, Pauline as “Polly gets as close as she can as a black woman to experience the privileges of disembodied citizenship. Embodying the role of Polly becomes a substitute for what Pauline wants: a satisfying and substantial self” (291). She doesn’t attempt to re-connect with the motherline, but instead willingly accepts the role of “Polly” and in doing so, rejects the “ancient properties” and the “funk.” Consequently, her children are unpreserved and vulnerable to the damaging effects of racism, sexism, and violence. Into her son Pauline “beat[s] a loud desire to run away” and into her daughter she “beat[s] a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128). She reverses and fails the African American maternal process.

Significantly, Morrison names Pauline’s daughter Pecola, which is a variation of the name Peola. Peola is the mulatto daughter in John Stahl’s 1934 film, *Imitation of Life*. Adapted from Fannie Hurst’s 1933 novel and remade in 1959 by Douglas Sirk, the three versions portray “the strained relationship between a black mother and her light-skinned

daughter, who wants desperately to be white” (Thaggert 481). This allusion reinforces Pauline’s assimilation of the white dominant culture through cinema and refers to Pecola’s desire for blue eyes (symbolic of white characteristics). When meeting Pecola Maureen Peal asks, “Pecola? Wasn’t that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?...The picture show, you know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother ‘cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral” (67). The film’s permeation into the novel reflects Morrison’s commentary on how white dominant culture infiltrating the black mother/daughter relationship. As Jane Caputi states, “A principal theme of *The Bluest Eye* is its condemnation of the racist culture’s worship of white standards of beauty, particularly as these are force-fed to African-Americans through popular images—dolls...Hollywood movies. *Imitation of Life* is indicted explicitly as a film that traffics in such images” (711). Because Pauline erases and replaces her black culture with white dominant ideologies, Pecola learns to do the same and prays every night for blue eyes. Pauline’s inability to safeguard Pecola creates the opportunity of her self-destruction and societal harassment.

The film and the novel are similar in portraying two black mothers severed from their “nurturing communit[ies]” (Caputi 711). Delilah and Pauline are from the south, but live in the urban north. Although their personalities differ, both mothers share an enjoyment in assuming the “ideal servant” role. Because of this, they demonstrate a disconnection with the motherline and a failure to re-articulate their black womanhood from external definitions perpetuated by white dominant ideologies. As a result, their daughters attempt and desire to “pass” as white. The film allusions truly demonstrate the ruptured African American maternal model in the novel and confined black maternal

space. Like Delilah, Pauline acts “in terms of what [white] patriarchy deems appropriate” (Kaplan 131). Her maternal behavior, when present, is very controlled and thus, Pecola is unpreserved. In contrast to Sethe and Eva, Pauline finds restriction in mothering Pecola because she departs from the African American maternal model. Therefore, Pecola is without any maternal guidance and too is incapable of developing an authentic self. In fact, she is represented without an identity or one with very little substance. Morrison presents her unable of *seeing* herself because she does not have a self to *see* “until she hallucinates” one in the end (Morrison Afterword 215). In lacking a self-defined maternal figure, Pecola cannot construct her own female and future, maternal identity.

Among the few interactions between Pauline and Pecola, the scene at the Fisher house is symbolic of their relationship. After Pecola accidentally drops the freshly made berry cobbler “Polly” made for the Fishers, Claudia Macteer narrates, “In one gallop [Mrs. Breedlove] was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication” (109). In contrast, Pauline says to the Fisher girl, “ ‘Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don’t cry no more. Polly will change it’ ” (109). Pauline’s mothering to the Fisher girl represents the disoriented African American maternal model. Pauline reserves preservative love for the white Fisher girl rather than her own daughter. Her identification with the Fishers leads to her denial of Pecola.

The absence of child preservation is symbolically represented by Pauline’s absence from the Breedlove household, which gives Cholly the opportunity to rape

Pecola. It is the utmost violation and pinnacle moment of collapse. The narrator describes the aftermath: “So when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her” (163). Pauline’s reappearance only after the rape finalizes her as the ruptured mother. Even more so, her depiction contributes to Pecola’s danger rather than survival. Cholly’s self-deprecation confronts the African American paternal model and although it is not a component I address, his action is pivotal to my argument. In many ways, Pauline fails to mother according to the African American maternal model. She does not assure Pecola’s survival by any means and in fact, prohibits it. In a sense, Pecola is motherless.

In the end, Morrison presents Pecola as insane. She believes her prayers have been answered and that she finally has blue eyes. Pecola also hallucinates a friend to engage in a disturbing conversation with. Pecola enters a privatized, chaotic space as they debate whether or not her newfound blue eyes are the bluest. According to Kuenz, “The ugliness of her entire body is dissolved in and absolved by the blue eyes only she and her new ‘friend’ can see. Her breakdown at the end of the novel is the last in a series of instances in which boundaries marking the space between inside and outside, self and other, sense and nonsense are broken, removed, or simply no longer perform their tasks...the erasure of Pecola’s body and sexuality lead to her madness and isolation” (428). Later, Morrison reveals Cholly has impregnated Pecola. This supports the novel’s theme of permeation. The white dominant culture infiltrates the Breedlove family and plants the seed for self-destruction. Through Pauline’s disconnect with the motherline and lack of communal involvement, her actions are controlled by white patriarchy. This

leaves Pecola completely vulnerable to violation. She is defenseless against Cholly with her “shocked body” and unable to resist the white dominant standards of beauty found in Shirley Temple dolls and Mary Jane candies. Thus, as Morrison foretells in the increasingly chaotic versions of the Dick-and-Jane preface, the Breedloves’ attempt to live by the white normative discourse of family and beauty proves detrimental.

Mrs. Macteer is a second maternal figure in the novel. However, her representation directly opposes Pauline’s. Mrs. Macteer displays a full connection to the motherline through remembering/passing down “ancient properties” and the “funk” as well as full involvement in the female community. She has a strong sense of self, at times “othermothers” Pecola, and through preservation of her daughters exists in a liberated maternal space. In the passage that Claudia narrates, Mrs. Macteer represents the “ancient properties” through song. She states, “If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn’t so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times...” (25). Through this means of expression, Mrs. Macteer passes down the “traditional conceptions of black womanhood.” Because African American culture is conveyed to Claudia, she is able to *see* the colors in her mother’s song. She states, “Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother’s voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet” (26). Claudia’s observation and preceding reflection returns to Kidd’s statement that story telling alleviates and validates African American pain. Furthermore, it teaches her daughters “how to survive and endure” (O’Reilly 125).

Another example of Claudia conveying the “funk” is how she “revels in her body’s myriad substances and smells. While women like Geraldine are quick to dispatch with ‘funk’ wherever it ‘crusts,’ Claudia is fascinated with her own body’s sometimes graphically nauseating materiality” (Kuenz 423). Although Kuenz interprets this as Claudia’s pre-sexualized state, Mrs. Macteer through her own uninhibited cultural behavior teaches Claudia to honor her “funk.” Mrs. Macteer demonstrates a strong connection to the motherline because of her artistic expression. The fact that she is displaying this in front of Claudia is quintessential to the mother/daughter relationship. Claudia is given an example of self-authenticity and she is able to hear/see the richness of cultural bearing all the while experiencing preservative love.

In addition, Mrs. Macteer’s participation in the female community teaches her daughters that motherhood/womanhood is a site of *cultural empowerment*. Morrison presents Mrs. Macteer conversing with other women and its effects on her daughters. Claudia narrates, “Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires...all of it punctured with warm-pulsed laughter—like the throb of a heart made jelly...we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre” (15). Morrison beautifully depicts Mrs. Macteer partaking in female conversation while her daughter views and builds memories around their “dance,” sound, and body movements. This female community is intrinsically enriched with culture and “in its emphasis on the sensual, it signifies the funk” (O’Reilly 125). Claudia, unlike Pecola, experiences maternal traditions and performances essential to the African American model of motherhood. According to O’Reilly, “Mrs. Macteer speaks her grievances; she is not silenced by them, as is Mrs. Breedlove. Frieda and Claudia learn

from their mother's songs, soliloquies, and conversations that women have a voice and that through the speaking, singing, and sharing of experiences women can claim and take control of their lives" (126). Mrs. Macteer is enabling Claudia and Frieda with the necessary tools necessary for survival: communal involvement, self-expression, self-actualization, and a future liberated maternal identity.

III.

In Morrison, the African American maternal model is explored and applied to Sethe, Eva, and Mrs. Macteer with Pauline representing a rupture. In the black community, the mother is deemed with such a high regard. However, the white dominant ideology of motherhood tends to differ. White patriarchy largely governs the actions of the white mother. In addition, “matrifocal” communities are absent from white middle to upper class societies. This situates the white mother in a confined maternal domain, permitting them to protect their children by patriarchal standards only. As a result, the white normative discourse of motherhood not only lacks the practice of extreme child preservation, but also fails to understand it. In Morrison, this maternal practice is essential to the motherwork of Sethe, Eva, and Mrs. Macteer. They solely decide what actions are best to secure their children’s survival. This positions them in a boundless maternal space. Furthermore, the elements in the African American maternal model facilitates in this practice such as: connection to the motherline, cultural bearing through recollecting and imparting the “ancient properties” and the “funk;” and re-articulation female identity. Therefore, African American mothers return to the very history that constructed this maternal framework to carry out child preservation, and find freedom in the process.

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