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5 Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison's Beloved

Under these arrangements the customary lexis of sexuality, including "reproduction," "motherhood," "pleasure," and "desire," are thrown into unrelieved crisis. Hortense Spillers (1987)

Memory, prehistoric memory, has no time. Toni Morrison (1987)

In 1928, Virginia Woolf suggested that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (Woolf, 1957, p. 79). Although in A Room of One's Own, Woolf connects this act of thinking back and through the mother with the woman writer's relation to a female literary tradition, she also brings this form of thought back to her own personal motivation for writing. In her memoir, Moments of Being, Woolf reveals that every day from the age of thirteen, when her mother died, to the age of forty-four, when she wrote To the Lighthouse, she was haunted by her mother's ghost (1985, p. 80). Completing the novel enabled her to exorcise the ghost and to cease thinking about her mother. Informed by childhood desire and nostalgia, Woolf's composition of this novel follows an expected generational sequence. The thirty-year distance between the mother's death and the daughter's ability to write it is itself a literary and a psychological factor that explains the quality of maternal representation in many women's narratives: the distancing and objectification of mothers, the nostalgia that surrounds them, the tone of celebration and mystification, and the inverse degradation with which they are shaped.1

How much more unusual to have the opposite sequence—a maternal narrative haunted by the ghost of a child. Through such a violent and disturbing reversal of generational continuity, Toni Morrison's Beloved allows us to look at women's writing from the different perspective of maternal subjectivity (Morrison, 1987).2

I undertake this exploration of maternity at a moment of crucial urgency for feminist inquiry. At a moment when science and the legal system are engaged in the process of charting definitions and rights of families, children, fathers, and mothers—in debates around choice, reproductive technologies, custody, adoption, enforced sterilization, child care, AIDS, and so on—it is crucial for feminists to understand the terms through which we want to enter these debates. At a moment when the popular women's movement is rallying around a "family agenda," it is necessary for academic feminists to focus on "family" as rigorously as possible. And yet Morrison's novel can also help to define how difficult it is to do so in an ideological climate dominated by a hegemonic familial mythos that continues to perpetuate itself even as it ceases, more and more, to correspond to the realities of most of our lives. The nuclear patriarchal oedipal family, which grants authority to the father, fragility and the future to the children, and the total care of that fragility, the devoted nurturing of that future, to the mother, persists in the unconscious of contemporary United States culture—even throughout its subcultures. Although it has outlived its viability, the oedipal family romance remains a cultural master narrative and reference point against which other arrangements are measured, structuring feeling and thinking, theories and narratives, about family and about mothers most especially, even among feminists.

How can feminists, how can mothers, claim a discourse that more and more speaks for us? Although it is unlikely that feminists will ever reach a comfortable consensus on these issues, it is crucial that we understand the terms of the argument, and to do so we must try to scrutinize motherhood from personal, subjective, legal, psychological, biological, economic, historical, and technological vantage points. Yet we are virtually prevented from doing so by a mythos of the nuclear family that is founded on maternal objectification and erasure. Jocasta, the silent and virtually absent mother in the narrative of Oedipus, serves as an emblem for the way in which the psychological story of subject-formation focuses on the child and leaves out the mother. If the notion of the individual subject is defined in such a way that its very formation and development, that subjectivity itself, needs to take place either against or in relation to the background of an object—a silent maternal figure—how can maternity be studied

1. I trace the shape of these representations more fully in The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative Psychoanalysis, Feminism (1989).
2. Subsequent page numbers in the text refer to this edition.
from the perspectives of mothers? Are there such perspectives if our theories insist on defining subjectivity from the point of view of the developing child? Are there such perspectives if our theories persist in conceiving the symbolic in relation to a presymbolic dominated by a maternal figure who never emerges beyond it as mother? Are there such perspectives if mothers are mythified, mystified, objectified, abjected, othered, in the process of subject-formation as we tend to conceive it, and in the theories that conceive it in this way?

In my work on maternity, I have been trying to imagine what model or definition of subjectivity might be derived from a theory that began with mothers rather than with children. I have been wondering whether we could envision development other than as a process of separation from a self-effacing "holding" background. If we started our study of the subject with mothers, mothers who are always already double—both child and adult, both daughter and mother—rather than with children, what different formulations of subjectivity might emerge? In what ways might such a study enable us to combine a grammatical/psychological conception of the subject, in the sense of "developing person" and "subject of discourse," with the social/political notion of a subject who is "subjected to" and "interpellated by" certain structures of power, certain hegemonic ideologies and institutions? In trying to arrive at a notion of maternal subjectivity, I see the mother as doubly "subjected": she is "subject to" the institutions of family and maternity as defined by the hegemonic culture, and those institutions in turn "subject" her to the needs, demands, and desires both of the culture itself and of the child whom she rears to become subject to that culture in his or her own right. Thus, the mother is the "object" to the child's "subjectivity" in that other sense of the "subject" as the ego or the "I"—the subject of discourse, of consciousness, of identity. The term subject remains useful, then, precisely because of its ambiguity and multivalence. Unlike such other humanist terms as self or identity and individuality, which imply an undivided sense of self-ownership, subject combines the divisions, contradictions, and erasures theorized in poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and neo-Marxism with the sense of uniqueness and singularity that, although a leftover from humanism, continues to be powerful in the constitution of personhood as our culture conceives it. Furthermore, the notion of subject also includes a definition of subjectivity as "interiority" and depth. It is precisely the notion of subject and subjectivity that enables us to ask what happens, in the process of the work of maternity and in the process of the child's subject formation, to the maternal "I," to maternal self-consciousness, identity, and selfhood. It enables us to attempt to describe and to theorize maternal "subjectivity" in this complicated and contradictory sense.

As a text for this exploration, Beloved tests in very particular ways the familial ideologies that have controlled maternal representations. Morrison's Sethe is a slave mother, and, as such, she participates in a different familial and maternal mythos and has a different relation to any conception of "selfhood," "individuality," or "subjectivity." The slave mother is interpellated first and primarily into the institution of slavery: family and maternity therefore have different meanings for her. And she is "subjected" less subtly with the whip and the chain; her very body marks her as a slave. Slavery heightens and intensifies the experience of family and of motherhood, of connection and separation. It raises questions about what it means to have a self, and to give that self away. It raises questions about what family means, and about the ways in which nuclear configurations (dominant in the master culture and in that culture's master narrative) prevail as points of reference even in economies in which they are thoroughly displaced and disrupted.

Since the infamous Moynihan report in 1965, Americans have come to see the African-American family as a matriarchy in which mothers rather than fathers have power and presence (Moynihan, 1965). But we have also been taught that children need to be dispossessed of a maternal power deemed illegitimate and harmful. Moynihan and later Bill Moyers in his 1986 television documentary on "The Vanishing Black Family: Crisis in Black America," as well as other analysts of what we are told is "the crisis of the black family," see the history of slavery with which mothers mark their children as the root of familial structures that are dysfunctional, especially for sons. In recent years, African-American writers, feminist scholars, and cultural critics have unveiled the racist assumptions that underlie these representations, as they have confronted with one another the divergent ideologies of gender that shape black femininity and masculinity, on the one hand, and white femininity and masculinity, on the other. They have insisted, as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) does most recently, that the maternal practices of African-American mothers can provide models for a critique of hegemonic familial structures dominated by patriarchy and capitalism and therefore oppressive to women and children.

Beloved reveals these divergences: it tests the notion of matriarchal power and its effects on children by allowing an African-American mother herself to speak, to assert and to probe, however tentatively, a maternal subjectivity, the

3. For more extensive discussions of the child-centered bias of psychoanalytic and feminist theories, see Suleiman (1985, 1988) and Chodorow and Contratto (1989).
4. For a useful discussion of the term subject and the various theoretical appropriations of that term, see Paul Smith (1988).
5. For a feminist critique of the postmodernist dismantling of the humanist subject, see Miller (1988). See also Owens (1983) and Jardine (1985).
6. The figure of the slave mother appears in a number of recent discussions both of maternity and of slavery, perhaps because the violation of maternal love can be useful in defining both the extent of the inhumanity of slavery and the power of that love. For example, Chesler (1987) uses Harriet Jacobs as a paradigm of the socially powerless mother. See also Williams's novel (1986) about maternity under slavery.
7. See Moyers (1986). For an excellent summary and analysis of the twenty-five-year history of media representations of the black family, see Gresham and Wilkerson (1989).
voice of both mother and subject. I would like to offer this maternal voice as a
paradigm, more broadly useful, for a different, a feminist, way of thinking about
families and about mothers.† Freud used the family of Oedipus—a family that
transgresses against the most basic definitions of convention and norm to the
point of constituting, rather, a counterfamily—as a model for the emotions that
structured his vision of Family. Similarly, we might use, in Beloved, a family
constituted under a slave economy that violates the most basic definitions of
humanity and individuality, as a paradigm for and a critique of the emotions and
the patterns that structure both the hegemonic master narrative of Family, and
its fantasies about other models—Moenihan’s black matriarchy, for example.
This is an attempt, then, to respond to Hortense Spillers’s blunt question—
“Does the Freudian text translate in short? . . . Is the Freudian landscape an
applicable text (say nothing of appropriate) to social and historical situations
that do not replicate moments of its own cultural origins and involvements?”—
by demonstrating that the particular historical situation of United States slavery
foregrounds the need to historicize psychoanalytic and literary paradigms
(Spillers, 1989, pp. 160–168). Slave mothers, because they “own” neither them-
selves nor their children, pose the question of maternal discourse with particu-
lar emphasis. As the maternal subject in Morrison’s novel becomes the reposi-
tory for the most repressed, the most unspeakable cultural memories and
narratives, the novel scrutinizes its potential to represent a resistant, even an
oppositional cultural voice. It may seem surprising, even counterintuitive, to
identify maternal discourse as oppositional: mothers, after all, are usually seen
as the conservers of value and tradition. Yet the peculiar maternal memory
defined in Toni Morrison’s novel as rememory serves as a ground of resis-
tance and opposition. Rememory is neither memory nor forgetting, but memory
combined with (the threat of) repetition; it is neither noun nor verb, but both
combined. Rememory is Morrison’s attempt to re-conceive the memory of slav-
ery, finding a way to re-member, and to do so differently, what an entire culture
has been trying to repress.

Teresa de Lauretis has recently suggested that “feminist theory came into its
own in a post-colonial mode,” that “a feminist critical theory as such begins
when the feminist critique of socio-cultural formations (discourses, forms of
representation, ideologies) becomes conscious of itself and turns inward . . . in
pursuit of consciousness—to question its own relation to or possible complicity
with those ideologies, its own heterogeneous body of writing and interpreta-
tions, their basic assumptions and terms, and the practices which they enable
and from which they emerge” (1990, pp. 137–138). Looking at family from the
perspective of maternity is such an inherently demystifying act. Moving toward

8. I use the term feminist here without qualifying it as either black or white because I
hope to be able to cut across the divergent familial ideologies the novel reveals without,
however, erasing the differences between them. A feminist discussion of maternity, as I see
it, is precisely a discussion that takes differences that are due to race, class, ethnicity, and
historical specificity into account, even while allowing points of convergence to emerge.

Family from the oblique perspective of counterfamilies, feminist theory can
come to a consciousness about its terms and conceptions, about their multi-
plexities and divergences. We can perform the act of “translation” suggested by
Spillers and attempt to cut across what she defines as the parallel and presum-
ably nonintersecting lines that “the African-American text” draws in relation to
“a Eurocentric psychomythology” (Spillers, 1989, p. 175). Translation needs to
be performed in multiple directions, however, as the oedipal patriarchal myths
of Family is confronted with alternative models. Scrutinizing familial defini-
tions and narratives in heightened and intensified form, we can perhaps unmask
the master narrative of Family as no more than the master’s narrative.

Elsewhere I have suggested that Toni Morrison’s Sethe, the maternal pro-
tagonist of her novel Beloved, is a revision of Sophocles’ silent Jocasta or of the
powerful mythic figure of Demeter (Hirsch, 1989, pp. 5–8). Like the Oedipus
story, Morrison’s novel is about the murdered/abandoned child, here a daughter,
returning from the other side to question the mother, and, like the story of
Demeter and Persephone, it is about a temporary, perhaps a cyclical, reunion
between the mother and the daughter she lost. Like those two texts, Beloved is a
ghost story about a child who returns to reestablish connection, a deep bodily
and emotional connection with the mother who was responsible for her death.
Beloved is not only about the child’s longing for a lost maternal object but about
the immense loss experienced by a mother who is unable to keep her children
alive and to rear them: It is about maternal fantasies of reparation and recovery.
It is about the embodiment of maternal memory and about the material and
erotic confrontation with a past that, paradoxically, is represented and embodied
by the child. Yet Morrison’s novel, unlike the Oedipus story, begins with the
mother, and allows her to tell her tale, to attempt to explain her incomprehensi-
ble act.

The novel begins in 1873, eight years after the end of the Civil War, in
Cincinnati and returns through flashbacks to the Mississippi slave plantation
ironically called Sweet Home. There the owner, Mr. Garner, who believed in
treating his slaves humanely, created an atmosphere of relative comfort: Sethe
and Halle could “marry,” Halle could buy his mother’s freedom, the Sweet Home
slaves were “men,” and not “boys.” When Garner dies and his brother-in-law,
referred to as Schoolteacher, arrives with his nephews to run the plantation, the
slaves come to know both the material and the psychological humiliations of
their condition. Schoolteacher uses them to prove the animality of the black race
by measuring their heads and keeping tables about them.

When life becomes intolerable, Sethe and the Sweet Home men undertake a
nightmarish escape plan: most are killed or disappear, including Halle, but
Sethe and Paul D. separately make it to “freedom.” For Sethe this is hardly a
triumphant escape: she sends her three children ahead, and in the final stages
of her fourth pregnancy, she is brutally raped of her breast milk by Schoolteacher’s
nephews and then badly beaten and scarred when she complains to her mistress.
In this wounded condition, she rushes on across the Ohio to bring her milk to
the baby she sent ahead, but on the way she gives birth to Denver with the help of
a "white girl," Amy. There is a brief respite when she reaches 124 Bluestone Road and her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, who nurses her back to health. But all too soon, her freedom and her children's is threatened by the arrival of Schoolteacher who comes to claim them under the Fugitive Slave Act. As Sethe sees them arrive, she "tries to put her babies where they'd be safe": she kills the baby girl and would have killed her two boys and herself too if there had been time. Her infanticide does buy her and the children a form of "freedom." Eventually released from jail, Sethe lives a life of guilt and abandonment: Baby Suggs, broken by her grief, dies, and the two boys, afraid of their mother, run off.

Only Sethe, Denver, and the ghost of the baby girl are left eighteen years later, when Paul D. arrives to tell his part of the story of escape and liberation: the death of Sixo, one of the Sweet Home men, who was roasted alive after trying to escape; Halle's smearing his face with butter after watching the nephews' assault on Sethe; and the indignities Paul D. himself suffered when he was forced to wear a bit in his mouth, and when he worked on a chain gang and escaped, chained to a group of other men. He also tells how he dealt with these memories until seeing Sethe: by sealing them and the emotions they evoked off into a tin tobacco box which he wore inside his chest.

The mother-daughter narrative in Morrison's Beloved depends on male intervention for its inception. In this it seems to confirm not only a pattern set in the Demeter story—there is no story before Hades abducts Persephone—but also psychoanalytic patterns described by Freud and Lacan, who identify the symbolic space of narrative with the paternal third term, the name of the father. Paul D.'s sudden appearance disrupts the uneasy household in which Sethe and Denver have coexisted with the baby ghost. His presence makes it possible for Sethe to find a way to tell the story of motherhood under slavery, a story by which she has been obsessed for the eighteen years following her escape. His presence also dispels the ghost, evoking instead the appearance of the mysterious female figure who turns out to be the murdered baby Beloved returned from the dead to make contact with the mother she has been longing for on the other side.

Familial structures in this novel are necessarily shaped by the institution of slavery. Freud (1908) insists in his essay "Family Romances" that once children understand reproduction, the mother is "certissima," whereas the father is "semper incertus," and he builds an entire theory of childhood desire and nostalgia around this difference. But Sethe spoke to her own mother only once. When she saw her mother hanged one morning, Sethe was not allowed to check for the mark under her breast by means of which she might have been able to recognize her definitively as her mother. When Sethe's mother showed Sethe the mark that branded them both as descendants of a maternal lineage of enslavement, she rewrote the slave owner's inscription as her own subversive maternal language. With this maternal act, Morrison's narrative aptly qualifies the ahistoricity of psychoanalytic certainties. Sethe is permanently separated from her husband, Halle, and separates herself from her own children when she

9. This is the illuminating point made by Goldman (1990).
“peculiar institution,” she was personally and legally not an “I,” not a subject, until after she freed herself, and she did not free herself until after she was already a mother. For this reason, Sethe’s subjectivity is not in fact “born” until the very end of the novel when she both recognizes Beloved as her child and begins to recognize herself as “Me? Me?”

Here is the moment in which maternal subjectivity is born. It echoes another moment in an earlier Morrison novel, Nel’s self-recognition as subject in Sula: “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me” (Morrison, 1973, p. 24). We need, however, to assess the difference between this sort of daughterly subjectivity and the maternal subjectivity we find in Beloved. We need to examine what makes Sethe’s moment of birth into maternal subjectivity possible and what its implications are at the present moment of feminist consciousness and social thinking about maternity.

Birth is an important theme in Morrison’s novel, and Sethe’s “Me? Me?” gains in significance as we place it in the context of other birth moments. The birth of Denver, in particular, occurs at a crucially symbolic juncture in the text, one to which many of the characters return. Denver is born during Sethe’s flight to freedom in a boat, just before the crossing of the Ohio into freedom. Sethe repeats to all who marvel at her ability to make it under these circumstances that she gave birth not alone but with the help of a “whitegirl,” Amy Denver. Several things occur at the same time, then: the birth of a new child, Denver; Sethe’s emergence into freedom and reunification with her other children; her birth as a free subject; and the sisterhood, the collaboration of a white woman and a black woman, united by their gender, their poverty, their subordinate social status, and by their stories of cruel masters, absent mothers, unknown fathers—yet forever separated by the absolute reality of slavery. In a privileged moment of connection around a work they share, privileged because they are allowed to have a space separate from any social framework (“no patroller came”), Sethe and Amy can talk for a few brief hours, Amy can rub Sethe’s feet and wrap Sethe’s baby in her undergarment. Significantly, as well, she takes the place not only of the other black women who would have acted as midwives in such a birth but also of the black father whose power to name the child she occupies by “giving” the baby the name Denver.

What is significant in this privileged moment in the novel is how it narrows and ultimately mythifies birth, maternal creation, subject-formation, and future hope. This process of mythification, and its ultimate demystification by the events of the novel, sets up the structure of narrative and counter-narratives, memory/forgetting and rememory, on which the novel is structured.

Although Denver’s birth is referred to on several occasions, the only full account of it occurs in a scene between Denver and Beloved, who, in Faulknerian fashion, reconstruct the scene together based on the stories Denver had heard her whole life from Sethe and from Baby Suggs. It is the interaction between the sisters that finally makes the story and Sethe’s own role in it come alive for Denver: “Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling what it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked” (p. 78). In her adoration of Beloved, Denver gives her the most precious thing she owns, the story of her own origin, and through that act of giving, the story grows and is enriched, uniting the sisters, keeping one interested in the other. More than a sister, Denver becomes a “mother” who feeds stories to her “child.”

In the sisters’ daughterly reconstruction, the narrative of birth acquires mythic proportions: not only does it occur outside of time (it is late afternoon, the sun is still shining, but the stars are already out), outside the social, between slavery and freedom, on the edge of the river (the river Lethe?), but in celebrating the power of maternal creation against immeasurable odds, it becomes a glorious tale of maternal heroism—a mythic birth of a hero. This is the child’s search for her origins; this is the mediated memory of slavery held by a generation that is already born into freedom. But the daughter cannot tell that story without heroizing and mythifying it.

Throughout her painful journey and labor, Sethe, who feels the pain, and Amy, who watches it, both wonder “what God had in mind.” Just after the baby is born, “the wet sticky women clambered ashore to see what, indeed, God had in mind.” They face a fantastic landscape that archetypically repeats the birth they have just enacted: “Spores of blue fern growing in the hollows along the riverside float toward the water in silver-blue lines hard to see unless you are in or near them, lying right at the river’s edge when the sun-shots are low and drained. Often they are mistaken for insects—but they are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. And for a moment it is easy to believe each has one—will become all of what is contained in the spore: will live out its days as planned. This moment of certainty lasts no longer than that; longer perhaps than the spore itself” (p. 84). Under the shower of blue fern, we have a story of maternal creation and survival that, unlike the rest of the novel, is “a story to pass on,” a story that does get passed on, that is hopeful and forward-looking and therefore understandable to the empathic, but ultimately self-interested, daughters. It is a story of sisterhood and hope with which daughters can identify, out of which memories and inspirations for the future are made. In allowing them to heroize this tale, Morrison allows the daughters to find themselves in the mother’s story so that Denver might develop into the mature, self-reliant, caring, and community-oriented woman she becomes at the end of the novel.

This account of Denver’s birth corresponds to Sara Ruddick’s recent discussion of the philosophical preconceptions of the birth process: “Birth is a beginning whose end and shape can be neither predicted, nor controlled. . . . To engage in giving birth is an expression of trust in others and a determination to become trustworthy. It is an expression of hopefulness in oneself and in ‘nature,’ one’s own and that of the child to whom one has given birth” (1989, pp. 209–210). As the novel articulates that hope here, it can use it as a critique of the culture of slavery in which mothers give birth neither to hope nor to individuals nor to a future, but to property.

The story of Denver’s birth is embedded in and materially marked by another story that the daughters can only begin to understand and that is also inscribed
on the mother's body—the story of slavery and escape, which qualifies and transforms the story of individual and cultural birth and rebirth. This is the story Denver hates, the story she wants to silence, and from which Sethe tries to protect her: "To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (p. 42). "Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it" (p. 62). But that story is there nevertheless, inflecting and informing the other. Thus the blood is not just the why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming powerful world "Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it." But that story is there nevertheless, inflecting and informing the other. Thus the blood is not just the blood of birth but the blood on Sethe's back where she was beaten, the blood on her feet on which she had to run. The milk is not just the milk she developed for this new baby but the milk she was carrying for the baby girl she had to send ahead, the milk taken by the masters at Sweet Home provoking her escape. Sethe's body, the birthing maternal body, is marked by the narrative of slavery, just as her own mother's body was marked by a circle and cross under her breast. In this novel, the mother's body is not merely a vehicle for the child's birth and creation: it has a narrative of its own. It is not merely the vehicle of a birth into freedom: it must itself be (re)created and cared for in the transition between slavery and freedom. Sethe cannot be freed; she cannot begin to be born into subjectivity without a “mother” of her own, and in the novel that mother is Baby Suggs. But this birth constitutes one in a series of counternarratives to the other.

Our introduction to Baby Suggs and to the scene of Sethe's arrival at 124 Bluestone Road occurs by way of Baby Suggs's work as an “unchurched preacher” in the clearing, where she gathers the freed slaves and teaches them to love themselves, to love, nurture, and celebrate every part of the bodies that had been despised and tortured by the white masters: “we flesh,” she insists, “flesh that needs to be loved” (p. 88). When Sethe arrives, Baby Suggs does just that—she washes Sethe in sections, wraps her body as though in swaddling clothes, and sews her a new dress. She soaks her feet, rubs her nipples, greases her wounded back, washes the blood that has inscribed on the sheets the narrative of Sethe's suffering. It is thus that Sethe can literally be born again.

Baby Suggs, the freed mother who has lost all of her own children, can offer Sethe an alternate to the maternal care she could have from her own mother. In her only moment of meaningful contact with her mother, Sethe was shown the mark under her mother's breast and was slapped when she wanted to be marked as well. She is marked by her mother, of course, not only by the bodily scars of slavery, but by her mother's history of infanticide which she ends up repeating. Baby Suggs, the alternate mother, the mother-in-law, in contrast, tries to erase the marks as she washes Sethe. In Baby Suggs's house, she can be nurtured differently than she had been by Nan who had nursed her and told her, in a language she no longer remembers or understands, that she was special, that she was the only one her mother had not thrown away. And Sethe herself can perhaps mother differently from Baby Suggs who, in order to be free, had to separate herself from her only remaining child, and who could now barely remember how her children looked or what they were like.

Sethe's negative memories—she does not speak her mother tongue, she was not marked, she had not been thrown away, she could not properly recognize the mother who had been hanged, her mother had not done her hair—had to be replaced by Baby Suggs's positive love of her flesh, by the spit the baby girl drooled on her face, by the “real-talk” with new neighbors. And through that love, Baby Suggs herself hopes to repair some of her own losses. Together, perhaps, they could invent a new and different form of mother-daughter relation and transmission. As Sethe explains to Paul D. eighteen years later, “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (p. 95).

The self that Sethe learned to claim with the help of Baby Suggs and the community during the short twenty-eight days of her rebirth process is not entirely hers to own; if Baby Suggs puts her together, it is not just for herself. As she rushes to get her milk to her baby, interrupted only by the birth of another child, Sethe constructs herself as the object of her children's needs. Sethe's is a maternal self, connected to the new baby she has just given birth to, to “the crawling-already baby girl” she is still nursing, and to the two boys who used her body as their toy. It is connected to the memories of Halle and Sweet Home and the past, and that past is part of any future life she can possibly build with her children and her mother-in-law. Again, Sethe explains these connections to Paul D.: “I did it. . . . I birthed them and I got them out and it wasn't no accident. . . . It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D., and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide” (p. 162). As she emerges from captivity at 124 Bluestone Road, as she emerges in body and in soul, Sethe conceives of herself in and through these affiliations.

These multiple connections are ever more pressing and confusing when this rebirth scene is repeated at the end of the novel, this time with Paul D. in the maternal nurturing role. After losing her daughter for the second time, Sethe retreated to Baby Suggs's bed with “no plans at all,” ready to die. Again her body has to be restored to her, for she has lost it: “If he bashes her in sections will the parts hold together?” she wonders. But in this scene the birthing and nurturing is mutual and multiple. Through the memory of Sixo and the Thirty-Mile Woman, Paul D. realizes what Sethe can do for him: “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in the right order” (pp. 272, 273).

And, as he holds her hand with one of his hands and her face with the other, he can help her to realize that it was not her child who was her best thing: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” He can help her get to the point of asking, “Me? Me?” With this double question, this double assertion of herself not in the affirmative as Nel had done in Sula but in the interrogative, not in the subject and object position “I’m me” but in the object position alone, the maternal subject appears. It is a subject constructed in question and in relation. After all the threes and fours, we have a two here; after Denver's heroic birth into individuality and after Sethe's repeated birth into family and community, we have a
birth into a couple here, a couple with one child, Denver, who returns only
during the day. We might ask whether this is a reversion to oedipal mediations
and triangulations, to the heterosexual adulthood Freud dictates for women, to
a story that is always already read. We might ask why Sethe's moment of self-
realization is located in the plot of heterosexual romance. It is obvious that
Sethe and Paul D. do not correspond to the heterosexual couple that is the
cornerstone of the oedipal family: Paul D. is not the father, he has no authority,
he has been walking for eighteen years and comes to Sethe to put his story next
to hers, not to exercise patriarchal privilege. Sethe and Paul D., the couple
attempting to give birth to "some kind of tomorrow," are not alone in that room.
With them are their rememories—Baby Suggs, the children who have gone, the
community women who have returned, Sixo and the Thirty-Mile Woman, Halle,
the other Pauls. Their story is not single, but multiple: they have put their
stories next to each other, next to the stories of all the others. Sethe's maternal
subjectivity is still affiliative; it cannot be born without the physical intercon-
nection of "his holding fingers" which are "holding hers." And no adult maternal
subjectivity can be voiced, even tentatively and questioningly, without the
haunting rememories of slavery inscribed on their bodies—Sethe's chokecherry
tree that marks her back but that she will never see or feel, Paul D.'s continued
consciousness of the bit in his mouth and the collar around his neck—and
embrodied in the murdered third child, Beloved. It is here, in the act of re-
memory, that we can find the differences between the freed person, the freed
mother, that Sethe was when she first arrived at 124 and the maternal subject
who says "Me? Me?" at the end of the novel.

Two other more obscure scenes of birth and origin serve to throw light on this
evolution. The first, more straightforward one is the uncanny scene of Beloved's
arrival out of the water, her thirst, and Sethe's simultaneous seemingly endless
urination, equated with "water breaking from a breaking womb" (p. 51). Sethe
speculates that this literal rebirth of the baby's/young woman's ghost "in the
flesh" must have occurred with the help, on the other side, of Baby Suggs. Later
that ghost's own rememories, however, place this particular "birth" moment
into a series of other infinitely more disturbing ones.

There is no account of the baby girl's birth at Sweet Home; there is only a very
brief account of her death, of the truth Sethe calls "simple" and believes she will
no longer have to remember: "I stopped him... I took and put my babies
where they'd be safe." This is the end of hope and trust, the opposition of the
outlook of birth described by Ruddick. Yet, as impossible as that may be to
absorb, it is a maternal act of, to borrow another term from Sara Ruddick,
preservation: Sethe wants to make sure her baby will be safe from the dehuman-
ization of slavery.10 This moment is, of course, the most problematic of the
novel, and, as such, it takes the text out of the pattern of narrative and counter-
narrative, to the point of antinarrative. Sethe's act of infanticide is simply not

10. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*: see especially the chapter entitled "Preservative
Love."
But when she becomes pregnant and her body grows to unmanageable proportions, she threatens to perpetuate the pain of memory to the lethal point where she has to be stopped. As the embodiment of her story, Beloved offers a model of subjectivity different from the daughterly subjectivity of the differentiated Denver or the maternal subjectivity of Sethe, and it is the confrontation with Beloved's desperate, destructive, and cannibalistic confusion of boundaries that allows Sethe ultimately to define her own subjectivity as "Me? Me?"

Sethe, when she realizes who has returned, believes she can now cease to remember her pain; she believes she can explain and reconcile. She believes that, like Woolf's maternal ghost, the child ghost can be exorcised, put aside, laid to rest. But she is wrong. It is her maternal rememory combined with Paul's return and Denver's longing that has made the return of Beloved and of the story she embodies possible. But that story's emergence cannot again lead to forgetting: Sethe cannot become Lethe. The merging, undifferentiated, engulfing, collective voice that emerges from Beloved's memories threatens to kill. As Amy had asserted in relation to Sethe's aching feet, "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (p. 35). Contrary to Denver's heroic birth and emergence into freedom, Beloved incarnates the terrifying equation of birth and death, past and future, mother and child, loss and reparation, retribution and forgiveness, rage and reconciliation. She is the past that persists in the present. "All of it is now it is always now." As Sethe insists to Denver, Sweet Home, slavery, the past, is never gone. It retains its material presence "even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you. . . . Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world" (p. 36).

Sethe can know this, she can be the privileged and dangerous ground for rememory, because she is a mother. Memories of children may seem to fade, but like the chokecherry tree, they are always there, even when we don't feel their pain. As mother, Sethe has known the connection with her children, both at Sweet Home and, differently, at 124. She has lived the loss of her baby girl for eighteen years. And, now, after Beloved's return, she is almost, but not quite, reengulfed by the relation not only with Beloved but with all the other children, all the other mothers whose rememories the figure of Beloved represents.

In the terms of Hortense Spillers (1987), "we might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?" As though in response to such a question, Morrison casts the black mother as the holder of meaning and rememory whose mark does extend across generations in the service of her community's self-recognition. Thus she becomes the voice of resistance in a society that managed to find a way to survive through repression. Through Sethe's, the mother's, rememory the inhabitants of Bluestone Road are forced to confront Beloved, beautiful and seductive, yet devastating and terrifying like Sweet Home. She is the rememory of slavery, the story of a past that is still there, out there in the world for everyone to bump into like a burned down house. Beloved comes forth to tell the story that Paul D. had locked up in a metal tin, the story that Sethe had never told Denver, the story of the past that Ella believed should not be allowed to take over the present, the story that Stamp believed he had already paid for. And what she tells threatens, in her beautifully pregnant body, to engulf and transform. What she tells can be neither reconciled nor integrated, neither forgotten nor remembered.

When the community women return to help Sethe send Beloved back to the other side, Sethe is born once again: "the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (p. 261). Denver has been feeding her, and Paul D. has helped her say "Me? Me?" As though as a consequence and a precondition, the novel's last chapter repeatedly asserts that Beloved is now again gone and forgotten. Even as the novel had convinced us that nothing ever dies, the novel also has to end; like all ghost stories, it must find a way to send the ghost back and to recover from the disruption it caused. This, seemingly, is what happens here, enabling a look toward "some kind of tomorrow" after having confronted the yesterday the characters so fully share. They forgot her like a bad dream . . . all trace is gone" (pp. 274–275).

Yet Beloved's story, the suppressed narrative of slavery and of maternity, cannot find closure. In Beloved, time is neither linear nor cyclical; memory and forgetting are replaced by the strange third option Morrison calls rememory: repetition + memory, not simply a recollection of the past but its return, its re-presentation, its re-incarnation, and thereby the re-vision of memory itself. Through the rememory of Beloved, the past again becomes present but its presence does not re-engulf, it does not kill. It can be survived. "Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there" (p. 275). It is Sethe, the mother, who is the agent of this reincarnation and of the survival it can tolerate. At the end of the novel, Sethe is the maternal subject who in saying "Me? Me?" has offered her own self both for herself to contemplate as a proposition and for connection with Paul D., her children, her community. The connections she establishes, however, are different from the undifferentiated mirrorings experienced by Beloved on the other side; they are different from Sethe's own wide all-encompassing body that could contain all the love she felt for her children when she was first freed and that is reflected back to her by Beloved's falsely pregnant body. By daring to voice her "Me? Me?" first, she can understand perhaps the false possessiveness of "mine" and the "too thick love" that enabled her to kill her child. And she can live with the unending pain of that.

12. Gayle Greene cites a conversation with Toni Morrison in which she claimed that the novel's ending was not intended as an ending but as a transition to another section; it was declared an ending by the book's editors and not by its author. See Greene (1991).
understanding. She can experience the separation involved in voicing a singular first person pronoun, and it is this knowledge that enables her to accept the connection of Paul D., his story next to hers, and the story of the others as well. Thus Sethe can undertake and perpetuate the act of rememory which, in this novel, has no end and no beginning, and she can do so and not be destroyed by it.

Linear and cyclical narratives of family are replaced, in Morrison's novel, by another shape, constructed like rememory, made possible by the 124, the gap in the sequence that opens up spaces of difference, upsets binaries, erases distinctions, reverses sequences. The trace is there and it is gone. The house burned down but it still exists, "out there." Sethe and Beloved have the same face. Beloved and Amy (Aiméé), Amy Denver and Denver, have the same name. The Pauls have the same name. The grandmother is baby, Baby Suggs. Sethe is the mother; Beloved is the child. Sethe is the child; Beloved, pregnant, combs her hair, counts her teeth, beats her up. Sethe diminishes; Beloved grows. Mr. Bodwin is Schoolteacher. Mrs. Bodwin teaches Denver. Slave life is like free life in Ella’s thoughts, “every day was a test and a trial” (p. 256). This sameness need not destroy: it can illuminate.

The novel's early reflections on maternal memory—never good enough to remember the good (Baby Suggs agonizes about all the details about her eight children she cannot remember) and never bad enough to forget the pain—are replaced later on with maternal rememories which is like weather. It is always there, “not the breath of the disremembered to be accounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather.” Maternal rememories, once Sethe fully experiences it in the novel, may indeed be capable of performing a task deemed impossible in the beginning of the novel—to remember the beautiful trees of Sweet Home and the bodies hanging from them. As the story of the past embodied in Beloved emerges, such distinctions and separations vanish and no one position remains comfortably distinguishable, categorizable in schoolteacher-style into separate characteristics. A series of counterfamilies, offerings of counterfamilies, offers a metonymic escape route out of the master narrative of Family-the master’s narrative.

Emerging from that master story we can begin to adumbrate another tale—the shape of maternal subjectivity that can replace the oedipal configuration with a multiply interconnected embodied subject, one who is both multiply “subjected” and a resisting agent in her own plot, one who is “wide enough” to contain all the memories of the past—all the pain, the guilt, the love, the knowledge, the power of the experience of maternity—yet clear enough to offer her “Me? Me?” to others who can then put it next to theirs. The maternal emerges out of these interconnections as a critique of the individuality and possession that made slavery possible in the first place. No longer a fixed place in a stable structure, it becomes a shifting function in a plural process.

Sethe and Beloved are rendered paralyzed when they claim to own each other to the point of killing each other. That sense of ownership is a repetition of a slave system supported by such conceptions of individuality, autonomy, and self-possession. Sethe is happier, more hopeful, when she accepts Paul D.’s holding fingers and his story next to hers. The act of putting their stories and their subjectivities next to each other, an act that issues from maternal experience but that Morrison locates not between mothers and children but in the adult heterosexual couple of Sethe and Paul D., suggests a relation from subject to subject that can reconceive the objectification of slavery and of patriarchy. The individual subjects of Morrison’s novel are shattered subjects who yearn for wholeness and wonder what will hold them together and who might help them to become whole. By putting these shattered subjects and their stories next to each other, the novel suggests how unspeakable memories might in fact be spoken, how a story that should not be passed on can in fact be transmitted. This act of transmission is a peculiarly maternal one.


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Part II The Paradoxical
Nature of the Maternal Position