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Maternal Resistance and Redemption in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

The aim of this article is to situate Morrison's seventh novel *Paradise* in her maternal philosophy and politic as it has been developed in her novels, interviews, and nonfictional writings. I am currently completing a book on mothering in the writings of Morrison; in this piece I seek to incorporate *Paradise* into Morrison's larger maternal vision and consider how this novel elaborates, refines, and problematizes Morrison's maternal philosophy.[1] The article is divided into three parts. In the first, I will briefly delineate Morrison's maternal theory, next I will locate *Paradise* in this thematic framework, finally I will consider how this novel expands and enriches Morrison's maternal vision in its redefinition of maternal resistance and redemption.

Motherhood, for Morrison, is a profoundly public and political enterprise. Morrison advocates a mothering centred on what she calls the ancient properties of traditional black womanhood. Black women, according to Morrison, are providers and nurturers; they inhabit the public sphere of work and the private realm of home and do so unproblematically; they are both "ship and safe harbour, inn and trail." "Our history as Black women," writes Morrison, "is the history of women who could build a house and have some children and there was no problem.... What we have known is how to be complete human beings ... you don't have to have to choose anything. You chose your responsibilities" (qtd. in Wilson, 1994: 35). Morrison argues that the "ancient properties" of traditional black womanhood, carried along the motherline and assumed by each generation of women, are at the core of black women's empowerment. Morrison explains:

> If women are to become full, complete the answer may not be in the future, but the answer may be back there. And that does interest me

> more than the fully liberated woman, the woman who understands her past, not the woman who merely has her way. (qtd. in Koeneny, 1994: 81-82)

The ancient properties of black womanhood, in Morrison, also position mothers as the cultural bearers who, in their connection with African American culture and history, serve as ambassadors for their people, bringing the past to the present and keeping African American culture in the community of black people. "[Ancestors] are DNA," explains Morrison, "It's where you get your information, your cultural information. Also it's your protection, it's your education" (qtd. in Washington, 1994: 238). In her essay, "Rootedness The Ancestor as Foundation" Morrison elaborates: "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self reliant if there is no historical connection" (Morrison, 1984: 344). Morrison insists that the well-being of African Americans depends upon them preserving what she calls the "funkiness" of black cultural identity; defined in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye,* as the "funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of a whole wide range of emotions" (Morrison, 1970: 68) and a term used by Morrison to signify black folk values.

However, in her insistence upon historical connection, Morrison does not advocate, as do the town Fathers of Ruby in *Paradise*, strict adherence to tradition.[2] Rather, ancestral memory for Morrison, is to be called upon to sustain, not restrict, growth, both personal and cultural. While ancestral wisdom is literally written in iron, if not in stone, in the town of Ruby in the Oven's motto, in Morrison's view history is continually retold and relived by each generation and is remembered (Morrison's term is rememory) to enable African Americans to live well in *the present.* Speaking specifically of a female motherline but applicable I would suggest to Morrison's thinking on the African American motherline, Hope Edelman comments: "Motherline stories ground a ... daughter in a gender, a family, and a feminine history. They transform the experience of her female ancestors into maps she can refer to for warning or encouragement" (Edelman, 1994: 201). Of concern to Morrison is the disconnection of African Americans from their motherline and the ancient properties and the funkiness it embodies and how such may be resisted. "From the onset of her literary career," as Angelita Reyes has observed, "Toni Morrison has been deeply concerned with the preservation of black folklore, and with sustaining positive black cultural values" (Reyes, 1986: 19).

What further distinguishes the motherline in Morrison is her insistence upon what may be termed the politics of the heart. Morrison argues that self love depends on the self first being loved by another self. Before the child can love herself, she must experience herself being loved and learn that she is indeed valuable and deserving of affection. Informing Morrison's writing is her belief that mothering is essential for the emotional well-being of children because it

is the mother who first loves the child and gives to that child a loved sense of self. Morrison's children thus move from mother-love to self-love to selfhood. Mother-love, in a racist culture that deems black children unlovable, is thus an act of resistance. Morrison thus places mother-love, along with the ancient properties and the funk, at the centre of black resistance and emancipation.

Morrison's motherlove and motherline as empowerment trajectory may be examined under five interrelated themes. The first theme considers women's disconnection from their motherline and how this results in the loss of their ancient properties of traditional black womanhood . Of interest to Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*, for example, is Pauline's loss of the ancient properties and the devastating consequences of such for herself and her daughter, Pecola. Morrison's concern in this, her first novel, is how women become disinherited from their motherline through assimilation in the dominant culture, particularly through interpolation in the normative discourses of the family and female beauty, and the impact of this on women's ability to mother. *Tar Baby*, Morrison's fifth novel, details a daughter's disconnection from the motherline, in this instance Jadine's disconnection results not in a failure of mothering as with Pauline, but in an inability, as with Sula, to achieve the authentic selfhood of traditional black womanhood championed by Morrison. In *Tar Baby* Jadine's disconnection from the motherline is occasioned by the death of her mother and results in her disavowal of the ancient properties of black womanhood that would afford her authentic selfhood.

The second theme, entitled "Disruptions of the Motherline: Slavery, Migration, Assimilation and the Loss of the Funk" examines how the African American motherline and the sustaining "funk" values it conveys is fractured by historical trauma, in particular slavery, migration and assimilation. *Beloved*, a novel of slavery and its aftermath, shows that slavery, more so than any other cultural institution, severed the African American motherline by separating families through sale and by commodifying African Americans as property, robbing them of their subjectivity and their history. *The Bluest Eye* with Pauline, *The Song of Solomon* with Macon and Ruth, and *Jazz* with Violet and Joe examine how identification with the values of the dominant culture results in the loss of the funk.

The third thematic is an exploration of how Morrison's characters may be reconnected to the motherline. Central to this exploration are the questions: how is reconnecting made possible and by whom? *Song of Solomon* describes how African Americans may reconnect to their lost motherline and reclaim the ancient properties and funkiness of their forebearers. Milkman's successful quest may be contrasted to Jadine's failed quest in *Tar Baby*. Jadine's failed quest is due, in large part, to Son's inability to fulfill the function of cultural bearer as Pilate did in *Song*. Ultimately the novel argues that men, as they are currently gendered in patriarchal society, cannot be the cultural ambassadors of the motherline because the masculinity they are expected to assume under patriarchy is predicated on mother-son separation.

The next theme considers how Morrison represents motherlove as an act of resistance. *Beloved* positions nurturance as a political act and situates homeplace, to use bell hooks' words, as a site of resistance (see hooks, 1990: 41-49). This theme first emerges in *The Bluest Eye* in Mrs McTeer's defiance of the hegemonic discourse that defines her black daughters as unworthy and unlovable. In *Beloved* Sethe claims a maternal subjectivity in defiance of the construction of slave mothers as breeders in order to instill in her children a loved sense of self so they may be subjects in a culture that commodifies them as object. Loving her children, for Sethe, is a political act of resistance.

Mothering as healing is the final theme. Morrison's sixth novel, *Jazz*, tells the story of unmothered children who never take the journey from mother-love to self-love, and thus never come to know their own selves. *Jazz* emphasizes how essential mothering is for the emotional well-being of children. The children in *Jazz* are orphaned, abandoned, and denied nurturant mothering; as adults, they are psychologically wounded. The loss of the mother for Violet and Joe fractures and displaces their developing selfhood; only when they mourn the loss of their mothers and reconnect with them is recovery of their child selfhood made possible. *Jazz* is thus a story about the wounding and healing of the unmothered children.

Paradise both elaborates and problematizes the above themes of Morrison's maternal philosophy. The mothering as healing theme is expanded to embrace the healing done by and for women. This theme can be traced in Morrison's fiction from the three whores in *The Bluest Eye*, to Alice and Violet's friendship in *Jazz*: women in Morrison function as mothers to each other, providing the care and nurturance that make survival possible. In a recent interview Morrison commented "The real healing is often women talking to women ... Hester Prynne now ... or Madame Bovary: they needed a good girl friend to come along and say, "Honey, you did what with him.... But these women were written by men, so they didn't have girlfriends to confess to, or laugh with. Laughter is a way of taking the reins into your own hands" (Ross, 1995: C1)." In "Mothering and Healing in Recent Black Women's Fiction" Carole Boyce Davies writes: "Mothering and healing are intricately connected and of central thematic importance in recent novels by Black women....These writers reveal that Black women, at certain junctures in their lives, require healing and renewal and that Black women themselves must be the healers/mothers for each other when there is such a need" (Davies, 1985: 41).

In *Paradise*, as the women take refuge in the convent, they nurture and sustain one another. The convent itself, Connie's home and the women's refuge, signifies maternal nurturance; kitchens, and cooking, both metaphorically and literally central to the convent, represent in Morrison fiction care and healing. Upon her arrival at the convent, Mavis reflects, "Here in the kitchen she felt safe; the thought of leaving it disturbed her" (Morrison, 1998: 41). The kitchen with "no windows," is also described by the men as they invade it, as a womb; and significantly, as Morgan stands in the kitchen he recalls being

bathed by his mother as baby and drinks milk in "long measured swallows" (1998: 7).

Connie, described by the narrator as, "a new and revised Reverend mother," is, like Baby Suggs in *Beloved,* a Healer to the cast-off and troubled women who arrive at the Convent. When Pallas arrives, unable to speak or cry because "the pain was too far down" (1998:172) Seneca brings her to Connie who, as the narrator tells us, "stretched out her hand and Pallas went to her, sat on her lap, talk-crying at first, then just crying" (1998: 173). Connie was, as Seneca observes, "magic" (1998: 173). Connie is indeed magical and, in this, may be compared to Pilate in *Song of Solomon*; both women possess supernatural other-worldly powers; as Pilate is visited by her dead father, Connie brings dead people back to life. However, as both women are spiritual and magical healers, Connie, more so than Pilate, is likened to a priestess or Goddess. Connie's home was once a convent; it is called a coven by the Town Fathers. As the men come upon the convent they speculate there may be "witch tracks" hidden beneath the mist (1998: 5). The cellar is described by the men as "the devil's bedroom, bath room and nasty playpen" (1998: 17).

Later in the text when Connie is in deep despair she is visited by a mysterious magical walking man (1998: 252); this visit it would seem inexplicably gives rise to her spiritual transformation (1998: 262): after this visit she once again performs her sacred food preparation. And when she calls the women together she is described as high priestess "With the aristocratic gaze of the blind she sweeps the women's faces and says 'I call myself Consolata Sosa, If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for" (1998: 262). The women, the text tells us, "look at each other and then at a person they do not recognize" (1998: 262). In the cellar Consolata oversees, as would a high priestess, a highly ritualized healing ceremony (1998: 263-266) wherein the women are cleansed of their suffering through a self purification in the circles of their bodies' silhouettes (1998: 266). The women, as Jill Matus has observed, "begin to dream collectively, each entering and experiencing the traumatic re-enactments of the other." (Matus, 1998: 164). Together they return to Mavis' Cadillac: "They enter the heat in the Cadillac. They inhale the perfume of the sleeping infants and feel parent cozy ..." (1998: 264). Seneca, when overcome with the urge to cut herself, marks the image of her body instead. Anna when she later sees the templates recognized, as the text tells us, "the terribleness K.D. reported, but it wasn't pornography he had seen, nor was it Satan's scrawl. She saw instead the turbulence of females trying to bridle, without being trampled, the monsters that slavered them" (1998: 303). "Life, real, and intense, shifted to down there in limited pools of light, in air smoky from kerosene lamps and candle wax" (1998: 264) "They had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below" (1998: 265). The exorcisms give rise to rebirth; cleansed and purified the women are baptized into a new self and world:

> [The rain] was like lotion on their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces. Consolata started it; the rest were quick to join her. There are great rivers in the world and on their banks and the edges of oceans children thrill to water. In places where rain is light the thrill is almost erotic. But those sensations bow to the rapture of holy women dancing in hot sweet rain. They would have laughed, had enchantment not been so deep" (Morrison, 1998: 283).

Reborn, these women, as the text tells us, "were no longer haunted" (1998: 266).

The healing potential of maternal care as shared among the women parallels the mothering resistance theme present in Morrison's earlier novels and reconfigured in this novel through what may be termed reproductive loss or failure. In *Beloved*, Stamp Paid, speaking to Paul D. about Sethe's act of infanticide explains that she was "trying to out hurt the hurter." In *Tar Baby*, Online, discussing Margaret's child abuse of her son, Michael, says "she didn't stick pins in her baby. She stuck'em in his baby, Her baby she loved" (Morrison, 1981: 279). Margaret and Sethe in these acts function as Medea figures; resistance against slavery in the instance of Sethe and patriarchal motherhood in the case of Margaret are enacted through maternal failure; rage and revenge are represented through harm to children. This theme is elaborated in *Paradise* in the character of Mavis. The deaths of her twins, I want to suggest, may be read as Mavis' resistance, albeit conveyed unconsciously, against her oppression as a battered wife and disempowered mother. Significantly, the suffocation of her twins occurs when she is buying Wieners for her husband because, as she explains to the interviewer "He was fit to be tied. Spam ain't anything for a working man to eat" (Morrison, 1998: 24) this symbolizing, I would suggest, patriarchal power.

In Morrison's previous novels, maternal failure of nurturance and abandoned/abused children signified an individual woman's inability to mother. In *Jazz*, for example, Rose Dear's despair and death prevented her from being a mother to and for her daughter. Pauline's Breedlove in the *The Bluest Eye* is unable to nurture her daughter because of her identification with the normative discourses of the family and female beauty. In *Beloved* under the institution of slavery, "Sethe could not, as she explains to Paul D., 'lov'em proper because they wasn't mine to love'" (Morrrison, 1981: 162). In each instance, the mother is unable to nurture her daughter and this "failure" is attributed to a disconnection or disruption of the motherline. Whether it was occasioned by assimilation as with Pauline or slavery and its aftermath as with Rose Dear and Sethe, the mother is disconnected from her motherline and can not bequeath to her daughter the ancient properties or the sustaining values of the "funk."

As *Paradise* bears witness to the loss of maternal nurturance; it also links maternal loss to maternal redemption. In this, the novel marks an important

development is Morrison's view of mothering as resistance. Maternal "failure'" in *Paradise* engenders a maternal community. The death of her twins bring Mavis to the convent; while it is her mother's betrayal that brings Pallas. Seneca's suffering is attributed to her mother's abandonment of her as a child; likewise with Gigi. So too with the town women. Billie Dee arrives at the convent following a fight with her mother that almost killed her. Annette comes in search of an abortion; Soanne seeks assistance to bring on a miscarriage. Sweet, the mother of four sickly children, visits the Convent as does Lone, the now scorned midwife. While the convent women, both guests and residents, have experienced loss and discord as actual biological mothers and daughters, they form a female community based on maternal roles and relationships. They mother each other in and through healing that is both motherly and daughterly; they engage in othermothering, as described by Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and perform maternal healing as noted by Carol Boyce Davies (1985) above.

These fractures or failures in maternal roles and relationships also, I want to suggest, mark a much larger communal failure of care and nurturance. In *Paradise,* maternal failure signifies not so much an individual woman's inability to mother because of her disconnection from her motherline, but a *community's* failure to nurture because of its denial, disparagemt and displacement of the funk and the ancient properties. The well-being of a community may be measured, it is often argued, by the well-being of its children. The barreness, abortions, miscarriages, sickly children, and dead babies, as well the maternal abandonment and neglect, motherlessness, mother loss, mother-daughter estrangement described in this novel represent Haven and later Ruby's inability to sustain community. And this is precisely because it is not a real community, modeled as it is on patriarchal values of power, status, ownership, control, demarcated by the Oven's words and enacted through the town's philosophy of racial seclusion and selection. In so doing, the town Fathers have exorcized the ancient properties and the funk that Morrison positions at the centre of black resistance and empowerment. In Haven and later Ruby the sustaining values of the funk are lost through the hegemonic rule of the masculine and the subsequent marginalization of women and the feminine. In contrast, the convent woman create a maternal community from their own individual maternal losses; a community that affirms both the funk and the ancient properties.

Morrison's renditions of motherhood are truly horrifying: a son burnt to death; a baby whose throat is slit; children who are abused, abandoned, beaten and neglected by their mothers—these harrowing events permeate her first six novels and in *Paradise* this reproductive horror bespeaks a much larger and greater communal loss of care and connectedness. Yet while her meditations on motherhood cause despair, they also bring hope, and this I would suggest is particularly true in *Paradise.* The women, embodying funk and the ancient properties, "endure" while the text suggests that the town, in its present

patriarchal configuration, will not. At the conclusion of the novel, after the storming of the convent and the disappearance of the women, Anna discovers five eggs in the Convent hen house. This, I want to suggest, signifies both the "survival" of the five women and the hope that, despite the women's "death," the sustaining values of the funk and the ancient properties have prevailed. Eggs have always signified in Morrison' fiction the funk and the ancient properties; Milkman is captivated by the image of Pilate peeling a hard-boiled egg and Jadine is mesmerized by the African woman who carries the eggs cupped beneath her chin. At the conclusion of this novel, Anna stands holding the eggs in the Convent garden that is described as:

> Beyond was blossom and death. Shriveled tomato plants alongside crops of leafy green reseeding themselves with golden flowers; pink hollyhocks so tall the heads leaned all the way over a trail of bright squash blossoms; lacy tops of carrots browned and lifeless next to straight green spikes of onion. Melons split their readiness showing gums of juicy red. Anna sighed at the mix of neglect and unconquerable growth. The five eggs umber in her hands. (Morrison, 1998: 304-305)

The garden and the brown eggs, I would argue, metaphorically signify the tenacity and ultimate triumph of the funk and the feminine.

Paradise has been called Morrison's most feminist novel. While I would agree that this novel exposes, perhaps more so than her previous books—though this point is debatable—the horror that is patriarchy, I would argue that in labeling the book feminist and in reading it as a "woman's novel" we are left with an incomplete and truncated understanding of the novel and Morrison's larger vision. Morrison insists that the well-being of African Americans depends upon them preserving the funk and ancient properties of their African American cultural identity; of concern to Morrison in all of her novels is the disruption and disconnection of the motherline that would bequeath these values to each generation. In her first six novels slavery, migration and assimilation sever the motherline. In this novel, the motherline is ruptured by the black community itself in its repression of the folk and the feminine, symbolically enacted through the murder of the women. The murder of the women, unspeakably tragic in itself, thus also signifies the death of what Morrison has deemed essential for the survival of African American culture. At a recent symposium on Toni Morrison's *Paradise* the presenters debated whether this book delivers salvation or merely conveys despair.[3] I think the novel, at least symbolically, ends with the promise of redemption. The funk, the feminine and the ancient properties of the motherline have survived and, will triumph over the Town: "The Oven" (symbol of the town), the text tells us, "shifts just slightly, on one side. The impacted ground on which it rests is undermined" (Morrison, 1998: 303). And at the novel's end the women, we are

told, "rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise" (1998: 318). Am image of hope, if not salvation.

[1]My book, tentatively entitled *Morrison on Motherhood,* will be published by Ohio State Press, Summer 2000.
[2]Jill Matus in *Toni Morrison,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) writes "Wheras Morrison's previous work has articulated the importance of bearing witness to the past and of coming to terms with traumatic history through memory and narrative, her most recent novel explores the excesses of commemoration as a sympton of enduring trauma" *Paradise,* Matus goes on to explain, is about a town "deafened by the roar of it own history" (306).
[3]"International Symposium on Toni Morrison's *Paradise,*" February 24, 1999; co-ordinated by Dr. Andrea O'Reilly and hosted by McLaughlin College, York Univerity, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

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