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Masculine Expansions of Othermothering in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, *Jazz*, and *Beloved*

*Othermothering in African American communities began as a system of childcare but has evolved into the care of individuals in need. Toni Morrison's work presents myriad examples of othermothering performed by black women. Perhaps more intriguing are the sites where othermothering as a system of care work in Morrison's novels serves to subvert gender and race norms. Some critics argue that Morrison's depictions of female-centric othermothering allow black men to shirk parental and communal responsibilities and assign less responsibility to black men for carrying on the traditions and culture of the African American community than black women. However, this article examines how male othermothering in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *A Mercy* expands the master narrative of the ideal (black or white) mother by refuting gender roles and the naturalization of women as better suited to care giving. Morrison's depictions of masculine othermothering as a valuable source of care challenge the ideology of the nuclear family for its primacy as a family model.*

Othermothering, a concept developed primarily by feminist critic Patricia Hill Collins, is well documented in African American communities. Othermothering is linked to traditional West African cultural practices that involve mothering all of the children in a household or village by all of the adult women regardless of biological ties. Othermothering disrupts the nuclear family model of who constitutes a family and how those families operate.¹ Othermothering exemplifies Sara Ruddick's concept of "maternal thinking," which consists of three principles: "preservation, growth and social acceptability" (17), or also referred to as protection, nurturance, and training. Ruddick emphasizes that "the work of mothering does not require a particular sexual commitment ... Nor does mothering require a particular household arrangement. Nor is there

any reason why mothering work should be distinctly female” (xii). Although mothering generally implies a biological tie, maternal thinking also applies to othermothering relationships of individuals who may not be biologically related to one another.

In an American context, Andrea O’Reilly powerfully argues that othermothering continued to develop from its African origin because of the necessities of slavery and in postbellum segregated communities, in order to equip African American children with the psychological and social skills needed to survive the oppressive racism and sexism of a kyriarchal culture (6). These skills and characteristics include a sense of stability, connections or feeling of kinship, sense of self-worth, and knowledge of African American culture and history. Without such skills, African American children may succumb to the constant messages of a dominant society that devalues them as human beings rather than achieving a sense of self and of their own history and culture. Although othermothering began as a system of childcare, it has taken on connotations of the care of individuals in need by other individuals within the same community. Furthermore, othermothering presents a process in which adults mentor and aid other adults who did not develop the necessary survival skills as children and require healing on their path towards self-realization. Society views children, the disabled, and the elderly as naturally in need of care work; however, as Toni Morrison’s work illustrates, when adults do not receive adequate emotional support as children in order to develop into mature, self-reliant, and empowered individuals, they may also need the care that othermothers provide.

The concept of othermothering is important in Morrison’s work because her novels depict the realities of African American communities’ othermothering during and after slavery. More saliently, Morrison’s othermothers present a challenge to the nuclear family model as a universal constant in American culture. Morrison describes the postbellum family as “configurations and blends of families of women and children, while elsewhere, solitary, hunted and hunting for, were men, men, men” (*Beloved* 63), which resulted from the chaos of slavery and its aftermath. In these women-and-children families, Morrison’s texts present myriad examples of othermothering performed by women: Nan’s and Denver’s care for Sethe in *Beloved*; Violet and Alice’s care for each other in *Jazz*; and Lina’s care for Florens in *A Mercy*. O’Reilly writes that in addition to othermothering of children in order to transmit African American values, “Morrison’s focus is upon those adults who never received protection, nurturance, and cultural bearing as children and thus grew to be adults psychologically wounded by the hurts of racism and/or sexism” (29). O’Reilly bases her argument around the othermothering of adult women by other adult women.² Although some critics, such as Brivic, Spillers, Weinstein, and Schapiro, do make brief reference to care work undertaken by male char-

acters, most of the critical discussion of othermothering in Morrison's work seems to centre around the care work that women provide to children and to one another. O'Reilly explicitly argues that "[t]his psychic journey of return, reconnection, and reclamation [for a wounded adult] while directed to a spirit of a lost mother, is often initiated and overseen by an actual mother figure, a close female friend of the troubled woman who serves as an othermother for her" (41). This is in line with the gendered nature of care work and reification of gender roles. A crucial disruption of this gendered reification that occurs within Morrison's texts, then, is having a man assume the role and functions of an othermother as opposed to the expected paternalism of a father figure as authoritarian, disciplinary, and distant.

Although Morrison's female-centric sites of othermothering offer a plethora of material for scholarly analysis, I am much more intrigued by the sites in which othermothering, as a system of care work in Morrison's novels, serves to subvert race *and* gender norms and how Morrison expands othermothering to include men. I contend that male othermothering in Morrison's texts can also transmit African American culture and the psychological tools to withstand racism and sexism just as female-centric othermothering does. When men othermother, they disrupt the master narrative of the ideal black or white mother by refuting gender roles and the naturalization of women as better suited to care giving. This dovetails with themes in Morrison's oeuvre that disrupt Western normative concepts of the nuclear family, gender roles, and racial stereotypes.

My reading of the othermothering in Morrison's texts points out the potential for disrupting othermothering as a naturalized function of women and of the nuclear family as the only familial model. Morrison's male characters who othermother enlarge conventions of female-centric othermothering as well as disrupt normative narratives of masculinity. Similar to female-centric othermothering, male othermothering is not predicated on familial, romantic, or friendship ties. Instead, male othermothering emphasizes the othermothering of the most vulnerable in a community: former slaves and their communities, who are in need of healing.

Morrison's male characters who othermother interrogate gender norms, especially the expectation that men cannot care for and nurture others as well as women can. The male othermothers in Morrison's texts do not necessarily establish themselves as patriarchal heads of household who replicate the nuclear family and traditional gender roles; rather, they othermother adults and children out of compassion and/or necessity. Furthermore, male othermothers do so in a variety of ways, like female-centric othermothering, but with the same desired outcomes of healing, preservation, nurturance, and training, all of which psychologically equips members of the community with the resilience

to withstand systemic racism. Not all men in Morrison's texts participate in othermothering, nor do they necessarily care for the neediest individuals. But male characters who do othermother also lend nuance to black masculinity as well as disrupt traditional concepts of white masculinity and privilege.

Male-Centric Othermothering

Morrison's texts argue for recognition of black men's historical participation in othermothering and for men's greater involvement in othermothering and care work in the contemporary moment. In contrast to the stereotype of men as absentee fathers or as authority figures, Morrison depicts imaginative alternatives to the nuclear family that recognize the potential of men to contribute in new ways to their families and communities so that the burden of unpaid care work does not solely fall on women. Morrison's novels display an awareness that male othermothering has the potential to neutralize some of the gendered rhetoric surrounding othermothering and care work.

Some literary critics, such as Murray and Beavers, have identified the practice of othermothering in Morrison's work, and O'Reilly contends that these depictions of motherhood and othermothering disrupt the "master narrative of motherhood" (29) in American culture that arises from the nuclear family model. Although I agree that Morrison does challenge the "master narrative" of care work with the female-centric othermothering that occurs in her novels, I want to expand O'Reilly's argument: Morrison also challenges the detrimental societal effects of othermothering on women of colour and, by extension, on white women as well through expanding othermothering in her novels. When men othermother, they also undermine the assumptions and idealizations of care work in nuclear households through challenging not only the biological ties of mother and child and assumed quality of care but also the biological essentialism that dictates care roles for women as naturalized nurturers, which economically devalues that work in the process.

The gender of the adult caregiver is immaterial in Morrison's novels. Concomitantly, in low-income families in African American communities, sociologists Carol B. Stack and Linda M. Burton found that the "kin-work" in which these families engage does not depend on the gender of the caregiver or the cared for person when a need for othermothering presents itself (34). Furthermore, Stephanie Coontz contends that communal households with relatives beyond the nuclear family and biologically unrelated co-residents produce a "rich extended kin and community life" (241). Morrison's texts in which men assume roles as othermothers not only reflect norms in the African American community but also disrupt nuclear family narratives that place men as heads of households. For these traditional heads of household, the care work

performed by women is an entitlement rather than something that men and women render to others as beneficial to an entire community.

My approach to explore male characters who othermother in Morrison's work traces an arc, from an obvious instance of othermothering by the unnamed blacksmith in *A Mercy*, through the, perhaps, more literarily traditional narrative of male othermothering of Hunter's Hunter in *Jazz*, to the community othermothering performed by Stamp Paid in *Beloved*, and, finally, to the physical and emotional othermothering that Paul D renders to Sethe. This arc follows neither the chronological publication of the novels³ nor the chronology of the texts' settings.⁴ Rather, my reading of the othermothering in Morrison's texts follows the potential for expanding othermothering as a naturalized function of women and of the nuclear family as a singular familial model. Morrison's male othermothers expand conventions of female-centric othermothering as well as normative narratives of masculinity because their actions encompass the healing and nurturance associated with maternal thinking rather than the protective and disciplinary qualities traditionally associated with fathers.

A Mercy

Although *A Mercy* focuses on the roots of slavery and racism in colonial America, the blacksmith's role as an othermother is readily identifiable when he becomes a foster parent. However, Morrison first establishes the blacksmith as a caregiver in *A Mercy*, through "his kindness and healing powers" (154) when he cures Sorrow of her illness and later cares for Rebekka during her bout of small pox.⁵ For the women, the blacksmith is "a savior" (150) who cures Sorrow's strange fever and boils with vinegar and her own blood (150) and knows how to "lessen the scarring" (155) from smallpox. The blacksmith's othermothering seamlessly unfolds when the villagers entrust him with Malaik, a black foundling child who may or may not be related to the white dead man with whom he travelled.

To the enslaved Florens's great detriment, the blacksmith, in effect, chooses his parental love for the child placed in his care over his romantic and heretofore passionate desire for her (151). The blacksmith is the "you" that Florens addresses in her first-person narrated interstices of the novel and, for her, "[t]here is only you. Nothing outside of you" (44). Yet the blacksmith calls for Malaik first when he returns from caring for Rebekka, and he assumes that Florens has hurt Malaik without actually seeing what has transpired or listening to her version of the story (165). The blacksmith's assumption seems based on deeper gender issues: he values Malaik more as his potential male heir and cannot reconcile his sexual image of Florens with his expectations of a caregiver, nor can he picture a slave as a mother. Florens, deprived of her own mother and

despite Lina's care for her, has not matured enough to mother a child effectively and certainly not when she seems sexually obsessed with the blacksmith. She is in need of effective othermothering herself. Florens has already sensed the defection of the blacksmith's affections toward Malaik, "[a]s if he is your future" (160). Florens believes her future lies with the blacksmith; however, the blacksmith realizes that the future of African Americans lies in care work for and othermothering of black children. Driven by her desire, Florens believes that for her "to have [a life]" (43) beyond slavery depends on the blacksmith loving her rather than on care work she can bestow for the benefit of others and a larger community.

Morrison's text subverts the "master narrative" of romantic love through a man's eager othermothering of a child, which leads instead to his repudiation of his love for a woman, particularly because that woman does not measure up to his expectations of a mother figure. Unlike Florens, who is so caught up in her passion that she disregards all else, the blacksmith immediately understands the importance of caring for and transmitting his values to the next generation and accepts Malaik as his child. In light of his new responsibilities as an othermother, the blacksmith's desire for Florens, an emotional connection that had previously seemed insatiable, disappears (161). Malaik's appearance and need of a parent give the blacksmith a future generation in which to invest his care and love without the entanglement of slavery that follows Florens. Furthermore, Florens's status as a slave, for the blacksmith, is two-fold: Vaark owns her outright, and she is enslaved to her passions and is lacking in reason. The blacksmith realizes that he cannot raise Malaik as a freed person, in body and mind, with Florens's slave-like influence in his household. When the blacksmith applies his healing skills to Malaik's dislocated shoulder, he knocks Florens literally out of his way, and figuratively out of his life, in his rush to care for the injured child. This depiction of the blacksmith as prioritizing care for a child over his romantic and sexual relationship with Florens not only undermines the idea of women as primary caregivers, a role for which Florens seems particularly ill-equipped, but also challenges masculine norms and the primacy of the nuclear family as a universally workable, or even desirable, family model.⁶ The blacksmith is more than capable of othermothering Malaik on his own.

Jazz

Hunter's Hunter, or Henry Lestory, assumes, in some respects, an othermothering role for the orphaned Joe Trace similar to the tradition in literature of men raising others' orphaned or fatherless sons—teaching them to hunt and fish and the like as part of a rite of passage into manhood. Susan Neal Mayberry contends that "Morrison routinely uses skill in hunting—that is, tracking ...

as a trope for the process of black male identity formation” (198). In addition to hunting and being able to feed himself, Joe recounts that Hunter taught him two lessons, the first of which is: “the secret of kindness from whitepeople—they had to pity a thing before they could like it” (Morrison, *Jazz* 125). This lesson exemplifies othermothering in that it helps Joe to understand his marginalized position in a complicated, racialized society.

Hunter’s othermothering subverts the narrative of young men gaining mastery over nature, and women, in the process of attaining manhood through the second lesson. That Joe “forgot” this other lesson becomes evident in his murder of his lover and the harm his affair causes. Unlike other literary examples in which hunting and killing an animal assumes the status of a rite of passage into manhood through violence, Hunter’s message for hunting is less one of dominance over one’s prey and more a lesson in gentleness for and symbiosis with nature and people: “never kill the tender and nothing female if you can help it” (175). Although in some respects this admonishment to harm “nothing female” may seem to reproduce a narrative of masculinity that obligates men to protect women, Hunter does not appear to protect women in a physical manner at all but rather provides care when needed, especially towards Wild. His gentleness and care are more representative of mothering, particularly nurturance and healing, than paternalistic protection or discipline. Hunter discourages Joe from tracking Wild but also encourages him to show compassion for others because “[c]razy people [like Wild] got their reasons” for their actions (175). Joe fails to fully interpellate this second, forgotten lesson in light of his affair with and murder of Dorcas. Hunter’s example of gentleness contradicts the traditional narrative of sons learning to hunt—to be “real men”—from fathers and surrogate father figures. Hunter’s example of othermothering presents an alternative black masculinity that questions traditional literary depictions of white masculinity, often rooted in violence or other exercises of privilege or power.

Hunter’s othermothering and care of Wild completely lacks mastery and seems based in compassion and respect. When Wild goes into labour, Hunter midwifes the delivery of the baby and places him with a foster family. Hunter’s midwifery, a traditionally female role, also shows his tenderness undermines common ideas of masculinity that, on the one hand, fears childbirth, and on the other, devalues it. Perhaps Hunter selects Joe to othermother because he feels some obligation to help the child whom he has delivered and whose mother has summarily abandoned.

Hunter’s othermothering of Wild does seem, on the surface and in his own estimation, somewhat ineffective: “If he had handled it right, maybe she would have stayed in the house, nursed her baby, learned how to dress and talk to folks” (167). I am not convinced that Hunter’s othermothering of Wild is such

an abject failure. Perhaps Wild's experiences of rape and abuse left her too damaged to come to self-realization through any amount of othermothering. However, Hunter's othermothering may have been enough for Wild to claim her independence to live in the woods by herself and enough for her to survive on her own. He meets Ruddick's criteria of nurturance and training for Joe, preservation, nurturance for Wild. Perhaps Hunter also meets Morrison's additional criterion of healing for Wild, which seems more ambiguous an outcome in the text. Yet he is not able to train Wild for social acceptability other than her alluded-to relationship with Golden Gray. Hunter's othermothering of Wild supports not only the hypothesis of the need for othermothering among damaged adults, it also presents an argument that nuclear family models were not relevant to or necessarily attainable for African Americans in the pre- and post-slavery eras of U.S. history.

Beloved

In contemporary African American communities, women have become community leaders through their extensive othermothering of both biologically related children and adults and of non-related individuals in the community in need of care. Feminist scholars who study women of colour and motherhood, such as Stanlie James and Arlene E. Edwards, maintain that othermothering has given rise to "community mothering" (Edwards 87) and contend that othermothering in African American communities is a site for social transformation. Othermothering on individual and communal levels makes possible the transmission of community values from one generation to the next. Communal othermothering provides a sense of stability and belonging to many African Americans in the wake of slavery and the continued oppression that they experience through institutionalized racism.

Although Baby Suggs cares for Sethe and her grandchildren on a personal level, she performs care work for the African American community at large through her "holy" functions. Baby Suggs "loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed" (Morrison, *Beloved* 102) by helping the African Americans in Cincinnati to love themselves and, thereby, begin to heal from the physical and psychological wounds of slavery. Baby Suggs recognizes that "[y]onder they do not love your flesh" (103) and that it is incumbent upon African Americans to "foster a meaningful racial identity in children within a society that denigrates people of color" (Collins 57). Baby Suggs's care work as an othermother to her community, what she feels is the only contribution she can make, is critical for the future generations of African Americans if they were to live as freed people in a society that had recently practiced slavery and in racialized systems of oppression after slavery was legally abolished. Ultimately, however, Baby Suggs

relinquishes her position as a communal othermother when she can neither condemn nor approve of Sethe's "rough choice" between the enslavement or death of her children.

Stamp Paid does not perform othermothering to the extent that other characters in Morrison's novels do, but he fulfills that role, much like Baby Suggs, in the sense that othermothers hold respected positions in their communities and have value ascribed to their opinions. Because of his aid to individuals that also builds the community, Stamp has become a venerable figure among African Americans in Cincinnati: "Once Stamp Paid brought you a coat, got the message to you, saved your life, or fixed the cistern he took the liberty of walking in your door as though it were his own. Since all his visits were beneficial, his step or holler through a doorway got a bright welcome" (Morrison, *Beloved* 205). When Stamp Paid learns that Paul D has been sleeping in the church basement, he chastises Ella, and by extension the rest of the community, for their neglect of "coloredfolk" in need and their shunning of Sethe. Although Stamp Paid cannot single-handedly bring about a reconciliation between Sethe and Paul D and the rest of the community, he endeavours to bring the inhabitants of 124 back into the community by defending Sethe's connection to Baby Suggs and by attempting to apologize to her and to Paul D for the rifts that he has directly influenced. Instead of abandoning the field to public opinion as Baby Suggs did, Stamp Paid focuses on reconciliation and making amends for his own alienating actions. His efforts serve as an endorsement to the community and to Paul D to forgive Sethe. Because Stamp Paid's brand of othermothering functions primarily at the communal level, his persistence and willingness to ensure the survival of the African American community through preservation, nurturance, and training establish him as an othermother. Stamp has aided in building the African American community in a literal sense by ferrying slaves across the river but also in a figurative sense through his continued familiarity with the community and his guidance. His attitude of service to help other slaves in their escapes and his general charitableness in the Cincinnati black community demonstrate a necessary disruption in gendered roles concerning care work. Stamp Paid's redemption is not complete, since he seems to hold "unrealistic expectations of black women," especially toward Baby Suggs and Sethe (Mayberry 187). However, his othermothering demonstrates how black men can and do participate in care work on the communal level.

Beloved also presents examples of individual othermothering that allow the interconnections of African Americans to keep afloat the community during the Jim Crow era. In the closing pages of *Beloved*, Paul D visits Sethe after she has seemingly given up on living. After years of never settling too long in one place and loving "just a little bit" (Morrison, *Beloved* 54), in the singular moment when Paul D realizes that Sethe has lain down in the keeping room

with no intention of leaving it, he commits to othermother another human being who needs him.

On an individual level, Paul D expands female-centric othermothering through his care of Sethe and disrupts the nuclear family model by abjuring the role of an authoritarian father figure. Morrison writes the character of Paul D as “the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry” (Morrison, *Beloved* 20). Morrison herself claims that men such as Paul D and Stamp Paid are “free to love” (Mayberry 8), which indicates that they have reached a certain level of personal healing. Despite his horrifying experiences both at Sweet Home witnessing the disintegration of his family and sense of identity and being imprisoned in Georgia under execrable living conditions and the threat of sexual assault, Paul D has “something blessed in his manner” (Morrison, *Beloved* 20) and retains a sense of kindness toward other human beings. Although his initial entry into Sethe’s household could be categorized as an assumption of the role of male head of household, Paul D’s desertion and later return subvert such a conclusion. When Paul D returns to 124, he does so strictly as a caregiver for Sethe; he has turned from viewing Sethe as an animal to seeing her as a complex, autonomous human being.

Initially, Paul D’s way of dealing with his memories and feelings is repression: “the tobacco tin lodged in his chest . . . nothing in this world could pry it open” (133). Of course, the tobacco tin bursts open when Paul D undergoes his own experiences of healing as a wounded adult, but his sexual experiences with Beloved seem to move him towards othermothering in the sense that his repressed feelings are freed to rise to the surface. Paul D initially sees himself as a rescuer of Sethe and Denver rather than becoming an othermother when he drives out the ghost at the beginning of the narrative: “He thought he had made it safe, had gotten rid of the danger; beat the shit out of it; run it off the place and showed it and everybody else the difference between a mule and a plow. And because she had not done it before he got there her own self, he thought it was because she could not do it” (193). Paul D views Sethe’s willingness to sacrifice her children as her own means to achieve safety in a hostile environment. He sees her actions as selfish, and, perhaps, he would not have made the same choice as Sethe; however, he also does not love as deeply as Sethe does because of his fear of loss. Moreover, the simple truth is that the presence of black men in African American households did not guarantee safety at all, not in the Jim Crow era and not in the 1980s in which Morrison was writing. Paul D eventually realizes that his involvement with Sethe and her family had opened him up to the possibility of feeling love—a feeling that he had stifled for many years (261). Paul D can only contain his feelings by dulling them with alcohol—yet even then, his feelings come bubbling up in his memories of trying to escape from Sweet Home and the dignity that Sethe

restored to him when he was chained in a three-pronged neck harness. When his no-longer-repressed feelings enable Paul D to remember Sethe's kindness to him in a moment when he felt the most ashamed, he is able to assume the role of othermother for Sethe and "put his story next to hers" (322).

Because of his experiences and the systematic "feminization" that black men underwent as slaves, Paul D resembles Hortense J. Spillers' assessment of how African American men can achieve wholeness and self-realization. The gesture towards becoming an othermother to Sethe at the end of *Beloved* and "saying yes to the female within" (Spillers 80) is a transformative process that Paul D undergoes throughout the narrative, even as Morrison offers glimpses into the past that shapes him. He did not face the same choices as Sethe or Halle, but Paul D seems to have more resilience in the face of what he has experienced that enables him to preserve and nurture Sethe and help her to heal. His own resilience allows Paul D to become an othermother to help others learn similar strategies for emotional survival in the face of systemic racialized oppression and the legacy of slavery.

Ultimately, Paul D wants to "put his story next to" Sethe's rather than incorporate or integrate their stories into a single narrative that he could then dominate as a romantic rescuer or a father figure. Although women become emotional in his presence and Paul D and Sethe enter into a romantic relationship at the beginning of the novel, he initially does not understand the full significance of Sethe's rape at the hands of the schoolteacher's nephews when they take her breastmilk. Paul D is more concerned with the visible scars of the lash on Sethe's back and that she underwent flogging when she was pregnant; he does not fully grasp the psychological effects of rape and the symbolic power of Sethe's breastmilk as representative of her motherhood and connection to her children. Paul D does not rescue Sethe so much as he comes to understand her and what she went through. His acceptance and understanding of Sethe lead to his emotional and physical care for her in an othermothering capacity rather than in the role of a nuclear family patriarch. As an othermother, Paul D assumes a traditionally female role of care worker.

When Paul D "says yes to the female within," he is not necessarily feminized but brings a needed masculine participation to othermothering. While Sethe's healing has begun, it is not completely facilitated through her mother-daughter relationships with Baby Suggs, *Beloved*, and Denver. Sethe's journey to discovering her own self-worth holds more potential through her reconciliation with Paul D and his willingness to provide the emotional support as well as the physical care that she needs to heal her wounded spirit. Paul D is instrumental in helping to restore Sethe's sense of self and her value as a human being, after her relationship with *Beloved* has rendered Sethe a psychological mess and completely dependent on others for her care. If Sethe's reclamation

of her selfhood is representative of a collective healing for those descended from slaves as Allison Mackey suggests (43), the participation of black men as othermothers seems just as compelling and necessary to foster healing of the African American community.

As with biological mothering and nurturance, othermothering is not necessarily an instinctive process for men or women. More generally, emotional resilience in the face of trauma is a quality that produces othermothers and their commitment to othermothering. Paul D is far from a perfect human being and has his own emotional issues with which to deal, including an enduring bitterness over his enslavement and his later imprisonment. However, Paul D's suffering at the hands of white society has not entirely eroded his sense of empathy and compassion towards others or his sense of self. His emotional perseverance enables him to develop the capacity to othermother and challenges the idea of men as unemotional and/or incapable of care work that includes the psychological components of nurture and healing.

Stamp Paid's communal othermothering in an African American community and Paul D's othermothering of Sethe disrupt the gendered narrative of idealized motherhood. Morrison's men who othermother disprove the essentialized assumption that to think and act maternally, one must be female, which expands the edifice of female-centric othermothering, especially for African American women, and offers up Morrison's vision of how black men should and do contribute to their communities.

Conclusion

Through these characters and their othermothering of children and other damaged individuals in their communities, Morrison disrupts not only gendered literary narratives of masculinity but also the primacy of the nuclear family as a universal familial model. Morrison's male othermothers challenge the concept that women are naturally inclined to provide care as mothers and othermothers by showing men who engage in the maternal characteristics of preservation, nurturance, training, and healing. Her literary depictions may more accurately reflect othermothering in African American communities than the nuclear family model, and demonstrate alternative familial models that give African Americans the tools they need to survive and realize their potential as human beings in a racist society that marginalizes them.

Families as the seat of cultural reproduction inculcate a sense of self among members that can be empowering or disempowering for individuals. If the community, even with women as the "heads," produces families that follow the Eurocentric head of household model that is hierarchical and authoritarian, then it is problematic in terms of gender and reproduces paternalistic expect-

tations of governance. Such families resemble neither the realities of African American communities nor allow for care work through othermothering, based on the needs of the cared for and the predisposition of the caregiver, regardless of gender. As a result, women are far too often cast as naturalized caregivers and men are excluded from full participation as othermothers, both to the detriment of the individuals involved and the larger community's needs.

However, othermothering by women and men that fosters a fluid family dynamic is a better family model for the present and the future, not only in African American communities but in American society in general. Rather than depicting othermothering as a utopian ideal or solely empowering for African American women, Morrison disrupts the narrative around othermothering and the latent reification of gender roles in care work in order to free black women from gendered expectations of care and to integrate black men into systems of care work as well as to recognize the care work that many black men already contribute. The men who othermother in Morrison's novels demonstrate not only the crucial need for men to engage in othermothering but also the responsibilities of African American communities to support othermothers, male and female. Othermothers engage in collective healing, transmission of African American cultural values and in the ability to withstand and actively change the dominant racialized, heteronormative rhetoric about what constitutes a family.

Endnotes

¹The "nuclear family model" indicates a male head of household whose work outside the home is the main source of family income, a female caregiver who works primarily inside the home, and any children in the household. Although in many ways the nuclear family is not the dominant family model in the US as far as number of families who represent it, it is still the dominant model in discourses and narratives about the family, particularly in discussions about welfare reform and parental rights (Smith 51).

²Examples of these relationships include Sethe and Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, Violet and Alice in *Jazz*, as identified by O'Reilly. I would also include the women at the Convent in *Paradise*, Lina and Rebekka in *A Mercy*, and the women of Lotus and Miss Ethel's care for Cee in *Home*.

³*A Mercy* (2008), *Jazz* (1992), *Beloved* (1987).

⁴*A Mercy* is set in the colonial period; *Jazz* takes place roughly from the 1870s through the 1920s; events in *Beloved* happen prior to and after the Civil War.

⁵I would also argue that Will and Scully, indentured servants whom Vaark occasionally hires from their owner in *A Mercy*, display some othermothering inclinations when they midwife the birth of Sorrow's child, but then they

abandon her and the baby on the shoreline while praising each other. However, in this scene when Sorrow becomes “Complete,” it is perhaps more striking and salient that Sorrow “was convinced that this time she had done something, something important, by herself” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 157). Her mothering of herself through the process of giving birth to a child is Sorrow’s path to mental wholeness and self-empowerment rather than resulting from the brief assistance of two white men.

⁶Admittedly, although the blacksmith may well be an effective othermother for Malaik, he also causes collateral damage by disrupting the women’s community of Florens, Lina, Rebekka, and Sorrow (Morrison, *A Mercy* 71).

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