

ESTABLISHING THE BONDMOTHER: EXAMINING THE CATEGORIZATION OF
MATERNAL FIGURES IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED* AND *PARADISE*

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, FL

August 2016

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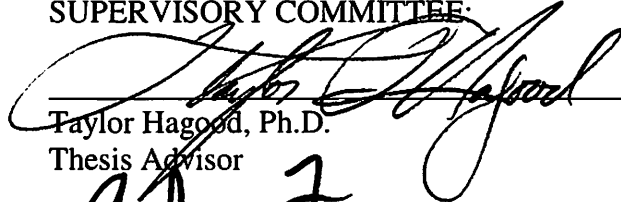
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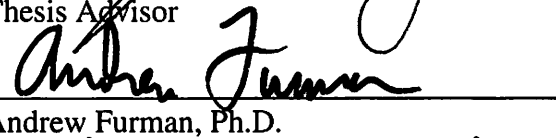
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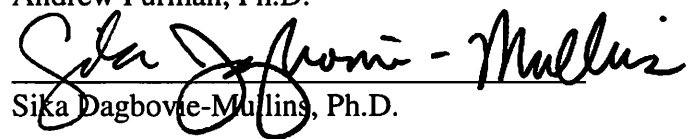
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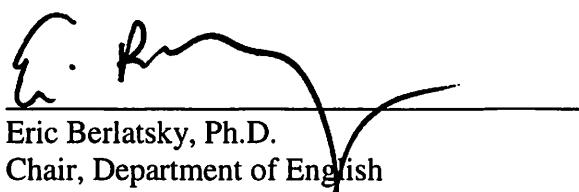
This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Taylor Hagood, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

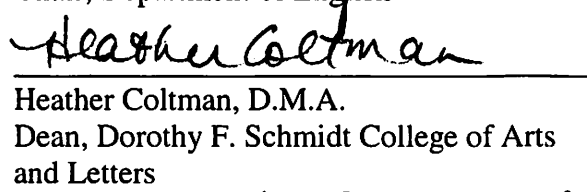
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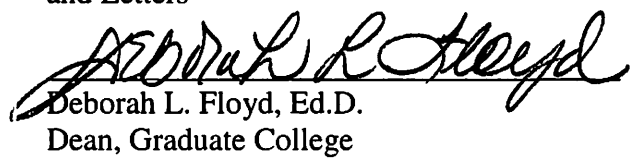

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, to God be the glory. I have been so blessed to have had the support of the FAU faculty and student body, all of whom helped me in some way, to see this project through. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis committee for their support and guidance throughout this process. Dr. Hagood fostered a creative and exploratory environment in which I felt comfortable sharing and developing my ideas. He has been a shining example of what humility, creativity, and hard work can produce. Dr. Dagbovie-Mullins challenged me to take every idea to a higher level by “complicating” them. I am beyond thankful for her belief in my ideas and support in helping me to see them through. Dr. Furman’s attention to detail and assuredness of my ability to successfully complete this project spurred me on to. To my peers, especially Rachel Hartnett, Gabrielle Helo, Jennifer Murray, Samantha Richmond, Natalie Rowland, Advitiya Sachdev, and Nicole Straussman I am thankful for their words of encouragement and constant inspiration. My family, friends, and partner have always offered me their unwavering love and support and for that, I will forever be thankful. Finally, I am forever indebted to Kendrick and Kylie for reminding me every day to work and play as hard as I can.

ABSTRACT

Author: Ashely Tisdale

Title: Establishing the Bondmother:
Examining the Categorization of Maternal Figures in Toni
Morrison's *Beloved* and *Paradise*

Institution: Florida Atlantic University

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Taylor Hagood

Degree: Master of Arts

Year: 2016

Literary scholars have been examining and recreating the experiences of “bonded” female characters within Toni Morrison’s novels for decades. However, the distinct experiences of these enslaved women, that are also mothers have not been astutely examined by scholars and deserves more attention. My thesis fleshes out the characterization of several of Morrison’s bonded-mothers and identifies them as a part of a developing controlling image and theory, called the bondmother. Situating these characters within this category allows readers to trace their journeys towards freedom and personal redemption. This character tracing will occur by examining the following Toni Morrison novels: *Beloved* (1987) and *Paradise* (1997). In order to fully examine the experiences of these characters it will be necessary for me to expand the definition of bondage and mother.

ESTABLISHING THE BONDMOTHER:
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INTRODUCTION

MORRISON AND MOTHERHOOD

The genre of fiction can afford authors the freedom to investigate American slavery without time or spatial restrictions. For authors of fiction interested in exploring slavery, these are necessary freedoms. In order to examine such a horrific system from the perspective of a subjugated people, it is to the advantage of the author to have the ability to recreate the dialogue of those silenced people. As it was illegal for slaves to learn to read and write many of the stories detailing their condition are told from outside perspectives. These perspectives include well-meaning abolitionists, and journalists or in some cases pro-slavery supporters. Slave narratives were retold in an effort to garner abolitionist support and were often written so as not to offend the sensibilities of their readers. These restrictions and adjustments offer writers such as Toni Morrison the creative space to tell the stories of women like Margaret Garner whose tale was both restricted and adjusted in a way that marginalized her in her own narrative. Margaret Garner was an enslaved mother tried and convicted of committing infanticide in an effort to prevent the re-enslavement of herself and her children. Morrison takes full advantage of the boundlessness afforded by fiction by going backwards and forward into the imagined lives of the enslaved extensively, especially in the case of bonded mothers, like Garner.

Morrison takes up the task of providing more dimensions to enslaved characters by building characters that exist within the margins of history. According to bell hooks

“marginality...is...the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance...this marginality...[is] a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being” (341). Morrison delves into the marginal space created by the coupling of literature and history in order to examine and recreate diverse experiences of oppressed Black mothers. It is within that marginal space that she produces a discourse that is counter to multiple presentations of the life of the enslaved. First, she resists the “happy slave” narrative, which seeks to prove that the existence of the enslaved was one that was in any way pleasurable. Next, she deters the masculine-centered discussions of the experiences and resistance of the enslaved as is often favored. The significance of Morrison’s efforts is a part of long tradition of highlighting marginalized voices within already marginalized spaces. An example is the work that author and scholar Deborah Gray White does in an effort to curb, “the problematic situation of sources, slave women’s particular experiences are easily overshadowed by the overwhelming amount of literature on male experience” (Jensen 1). Both literary and historical scholars have sought to take the experiences of enslaved Black women from the margins of those genres and move them to the center. Morrison writes, “My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate. The exercise is also critical ...for we are seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we are its topic” (2293). The “we” in this discussion refers to Black women who have historically been marginalized in conversations that spoke to their experiences as well.

The literary contributions of authors such as Morrison have catapulted the actual experiences of enslaved women in the academy and outward. Morrison calls into question the reality of freedom in America by centering the experiences of the oppressed and marginalized, thus allowing for a complete criticism of a “free” country, which was in fact built on a system of subjugation. Despite these developments, discussions surrounding the experiences of enslaved Black women, that were mothers, still reflects a one-dimensional view which situates them in the traditional theory of Black maternity. Specifically the portrayal of Black mothers as, “... matriarchal figures, superbly strong and protective, and at the same time, selfless, all embracing, demanding nothing or little, and totally self-sacrificing creatures whose identities are inseparable from their nurturing services” (Ghasemi 477).

Morrison purposefully complicates the nature of maternity in her texts. Andrea O’Reilly writes that “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” (187). She goes on to identify those “properties” as Black women being able to “... [be]...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" (187). I argue against this notion and suggest that the characters presented by Morrison are in fact the antithesis of this ideal as it has strong patriarchal roots that restrict Black maternity. Parvin Ghasemi writes, “While Toni Morrison sees motherhood as an important experience for women, she does not limit women's roles in the society to motherhood... mothers are...human beings with distinct identities, individuals who...have the

potential...to realize that motherhood and individuality are not mutually exclusive” (477). Considering that most of her work centers Black women’s experiences, she deals with the ways in which patriarchy and racism interfere with these characters desire and ability to “mother” and in some cases, of their modes of rejecting the title altogether.

“Morrison’s mothers” are created to represent both the realities of some women’s actual experiences and her own creative interpretation of their lives. One of these creative possibilities, “within the margins,” is that mothers could be doting or possibly violent when resisting bondage. This mother would risk any and everything to ensure her own freedom, including her own children’s lives. Modern characterization typically cites this type of character trope as that of the Bad Mother, “...she is all consumed and self-serving, the anti-maternal figure” (Ghasemi 477). Ghasemi further proposes that Morrison’s portrayal of motherhood is, “[...] in conflict with the prevailing notion which tends to idealize motherhood, [she] questions the social construction of patriarchy and maternity which often fails to perceive the identity and individuality of a mother apart from her child” (477). For Morrison, these attributes further complicate her characters and reflect the actual complexity of human beings. On the surface she provides a voice for her characters, but more than that she prods discussions of bonded women and creates dialogue for women that may have actually existed. The significance of this work is that despite the efforts of authors and scholars like Deborah Gray White, “adding to the problematic situation of sources, slave women’s particular experiences are easily overshadowed by the overwhelming amount of literature on male experience” (Jensen 1). What is noted here is a desire to include the discussion of women in a male-dominated genre. What is lacking is the diversity among women that will be necessary in order to

grasp different lived experiences of said women. The enslaved mother does not have a space among the discussion of male-dominated literature nor are they afforded individual space among other Black women. Morrison responds to double overshadowing of enslaved mother's in her literature. Morrison replies by crafting her own historical fiction in which these characters can be studied without being eclipsed by men or other women. The goal of this thesis is to establish a category for oppressed Black mothers, the bondmother and center their experiences and motivations using Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Paradise* as its literary roots. This thesis will use *Beloved* as a starting point for the theory and *Paradise* as one example for its potential to be used beyond the antebellum period.

In addition to this introduction, this thesis will consist of two chapters. In Chapter 1, "Are You My Mammy? Defining the Role of the Bondmother in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" the category for enslaved mothers, the bondmother will be presented as a category for enslaved mothers. First I will propose that the bondmother developed within Morrison's *Beloved*. I will offer a definition for the term and a reliable set of characteristics that many bondmothers share. I will go on to identify the difference between this category and others that Black women have traditionally been assigned to. I will explain the value of a category that centers the experiences of enslaved mothers, and why historically regarded maternal standards exclude these oppressed mothers. Lastly, I will analyze the significance of *Beloved* and *Denver* transitioning from daughters of bondmother, Sethe, to her mother and subsequently bondmothers.

Chapter 2, *Beloved is Divine: Tracing the Bondmother Pattern into Toni Morrison's Paradise* will examine the theme of broken mother-daughter bonds as shared

between Beloved and Paradise. I will propose that the scholarly focus on only a singular mother figure per text inhibits the full examination of certain “daughters.” The daughters I will center are Beloved and Pallas of Beloved and Paradise, respectively. I propose in this chapter that Pallas is an extension of Beloved and therefore the bondmother as represented by Beloved. I will continue a discussion of the impact of silencing the maternal offerings of the daughters and the value of changing that narrative. Using the characteristics as presented in the first chapter I trace Beloved and Pallas’s connections as bondmothers. I conclude the entire thesis in this chapter reiterating the necessity of offering space to oppressed Black mothers.

CHAPTER 1

ARE YOU MY MAMMY? DEFINING THE ROLE OF THE BONDMOTHER IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

On the surface *Beloved* is the story of a fugitive slave, Sethe, who is haunted by her horrifying past and the actions she took in order to resist her “re-enslavement.” Hirsch suggests that it is “[a] story about a ghost child that who returns to reestablish [a] connection, a deep bodily and emotional connection with a mother who was responsible for her death” (97). Although Hirsch’s description is true, *Beloved* is also a complicated narrative surrounding the interrupted and fragile bonds of multiple mother-daughter relationships, which have all been impacted by American slavery. In *Beloved* Sethe struggles to deal with the literal and figurative haunting trauma of slavery. As a slave mother, she is “bonded” to the institution of slavery, its traumatic effects, and children that are both hers and not hers legally. Hirsch asks “what different formulations of subjectivity might emerge if we started our study of the subject [of maternity] with mothers...who are already double—both child and adult, both daughter and mother—rather than with children?” (94). A more complex and nuanced perspective of the text is the transition that Sethe’s daughters Beloved and Denver make into the role of mother to Sethe, respectively. It should be noted that this re-reading of Denver and Beloved as mother figures is made possible because Morrison does not limit the role of mother to those who have given birth to “children.” Motherhood is often granted to certain characters who take on the role of other-mother as stand in maternal figures. In the case

of *Beloved*, mother figures are surrogates that have been assigned to these roles in the hopes of fostering love and safety in spaces that are typically devoid of positivity.

These

other-mothers often develop out of toxic environments like that of 124 where ghosts, trauma, and loneliness pervade the space.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reveals a fully-developed category for enslaved mothers, one that identifies their predicament of being bonded to the institution of slavery, and motherhood. I would offer this category the title of bondmother. The value of such a category is related to Hirsch's suggestion that studying 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" (95). Studying the maternal practices of *Beloved* and *Denver* allows for a greater look into the patriarchal nature of motherhood in slavery.

Loucynda Jensen, during her search for information on the physical acts of resistance put forth by enslaved women, described the experience by writing, "...my search for women's resistance to slavery means grappling with silences and gaps..." (1). These silences and gaps are a reflection of the way in which the stories of enslaved mothers have not been treated with as much value as other historical perspectives. Morrison's texts take up the task of grappling with those "silences and gaps" by creating story where there is none. Morrison gives all of the mothers in *Beloved* an opportunity to speak, thus eliminating some of that silence. Even if their own stories are filled with gaps of repressed memories in regards to those horrific crimes committed against them. A reexamination of categories created out of the desire to fill those gaps must occur as those

categories were created with the subject de-centered. These categories, like the Mammy, Mule, and Jezebel have been restrictive. In *Beloved*, Morrison recreated the lived experiences of enslaved mothers and bore an alternative category for the silenced mother. The bondmother stands opposite the categories for traditional motherhood because they were created with literary inaccuracy. These mothers and mother figures alike suffered both from the bondage of slavery and an irrational connection to their own children. The way that mothers are treated in Morrison's texts are as "...human beings with distinct identities, individuals who...have the potential...to realize that motherhood and individuality are not mutually exclusive" (Ghasemi 477). This multidimensional expression of Black motherhood provides the basis for understanding the behaviors of these bondmothers.

Building the Bondmother: Building the Bondmother: Defining the Bondmother

I have, with the term bondmother identified a "controlling image" of Black mothers that has been developing in Toni Morrison's novels for decades. However, it is within the novel *Beloved*, that Toni Morrison creates a "mold" for this category and allows alternative mothers to occupy the space. This occupation, of bondmother, affords a voice to characters which may fill gaps in historical literature. Unlike other controlling images, the Mammy, Mule, and Jezebel, this image works against subjugating notions of Black women as historically presented in literature and other forms of popular media. Author Rupe Simms argues that "proslavery intellectuals created three specific images the "mammy," the "Jezebel," and the "mule"-as preeminent features of the dominant ideology that justified their exploitation of female slaves and that contributed substantially to the social construction of African women's gender" (880). In an effort to

counteract antislavery efforts, and resist the toppling of the American South's financial stability "pro-slavery "experts" fought to justify Black servitude by flooding scholarly journals, polemical tracts, "scientific" treatises, religious pamphlets, and other publications with anti-abolitionist propaganda" (Simms 881). The literary contributions of those in support of slavery has continued to infiltrate modern literary contributions and expand those traditional images into newer forms like Sapphire and Superwoman.

The mammy assignment, "portrays the Black woman as obedient to whites in general, faithful to the master and his family in particular, and happy in her subordination" (883). The second controlling image that has historically been applied to women of African descent is the Jezebel a "...sex-starved woman, who was childishly promiscuous and consumed by lustful passions" (883). A third controlling image, "was that of mule...They perceived enslaved women as insensible brutes and subhuman beasts who were only to be valued for their labor" (883). The value of these images was that they "justified white male superiority and validated the inferiority of African women and their exploitation as labor units" (883). These images were created as an "essential element of an ideological system of economic control that confined Black women to a restricted and subordinated sociopolitical space" (882). In an effort to combat these images, and develop control over the narratives of Black women's experiences, authors like Toni Morrison would re-interpret the experiences of enslaved Black women and produce historical fiction about the antebellum South with their stories centered within the margin they had been allotted. The bondmother, like her literary step-sisters, can be defined briefly as a category that identifies the race, and maternal status of Black women enslaved in the US South.

More specifically, the category of bondmother identifies Black women that are mothers, either because they have given birth or are performing "maternally" as a surrogate. The "...birthing maternal body, is marked by the narrative of slavery" (Hirsch 102). The markings can be physical scars, living children, or traumatic "rememories" that haunt the characters. The word bond for these women is multilayered and attempts to highlight all of the ways in which their experiences as property intersect and binds them to trauma. *Bond* refers to bondage in its most literal sense, the state of being a slave (*Dictionary.com*). For enslaved mothers, they were with every birth, bound to a system that viewed them in some cases as mere breeders of property.

Bondmothers are all operating under this definition of bondage: State of goods made, stored, or transported under the care of bonded agencies until the duties...on them are paid. The state of the "goods", or children is that they must follow the condition of the mother. This is a reflection of an antebellum law accepted in most places in the US. The state of those children, "made" highlights their role as property and their mothers who only valuable as breeders or caregivers. The word "stored" is a reflection of the pregnancy or duration of childcare. One explanation as to why the "bonded" agent may fail to deliver goods assigned to their care may be due to a bondmothers attempts to escape. The resistance of bondmothers to their status constitutes a forfeiture of an agreement (that they legally could not refuse) and further binds them as their fugitive state prevents their bodies and services from completing the "duties on them that are owed."

In their attempts to escape their respective mode of bondage the women of the novel and those actually in throngs of slavery would sometimes follow a pattern common

among bondmothers: violently sever maternal ties between herself and her children, experience a “social exile,” and relive a trauma that would impact her ability to “mother.” In some cases, the women receive a communal healing from other like women that affords them some peace despite all of the trauma they have endured. This peace is afforded because “mothering and healing are intricately connected and of central thematic importance in recent novels by Black womenBlack women, at certain junctures in their lives, require healing and renewal and...Black women themselves must be the healers/mothers for each other when there is such a need" (Davies 41). This is a specific pattern important for readers and scholars to understand bondmotherhood. Bondmotherhood offers a different way of reading these characters, one that was previously controlled by pro-slavers with vested interests in maintaining a dehumanized reading of enslaved women.

The difference between Morrison’s image and those of pro-slavers is that they grounded their categories in rhetoric created with the purpose of maintaining subjugation and silencing Black women’s experiences. While Morrison seeks to offer a more nuanced presentation of mothers suffering under the system of slavery. This separation in itself of enslaved mothers as a category to be analyzed not under the same category as other enslaved women is an example of a positive characteristic of this image. Reading stories about bondmother’s offers a starkly different perspective than that of other enslaved women and men. Hirsch writes that Morrison “clears space” for an exploration of the Black mother, reclaiming the figure from prevailing stereotypes (99). I agree with this and suggest that she does so for enslaved Black mothers as well, by offering them their own category and voices to tell their stories with. More specifically in this context, the

bondmother as a separate category for enslaved female characters allows for a more complex reading of the motives of characters in *Beloved*.

Motherhood as a category is already one in which enslaved women did not naturally fit because their gender and race prevented them from being protected under any law. Simms writes, “They had no voice in the courts... could expect no protection from their men...denied the right of self-defense: The threat of capital punishment, which prevented their men from defending them, prevented them from defending themselves” (892). Supreme Court Chief Justice Taney, during the Dred Scott case, highlighted this lack of humanity when he wrote that Africans were, “... [when the U.S. Constitution was framed] ... considered as a subordinate and inferior class of beings, who had been subjugated by the dominant race, and whether emancipated or not, yet remained subject to their authority, and had no rights or privileges but such as those who held the power and the Government might choose to grant them” (78). This refusal of power translated to every aspect of these women’s lives, including their ability to “parent.” Hortense Spillers discusses the mis-assignment of the characteristics of motherhood to enslaved women. Despite a clear understanding of the instability of motherhood for enslaved women, there is still a matriarchal mis-assignment of motherhood to enslaved Black women that does not work. Spillers writes,

...the dominant culture, in a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong; actually misnames the power of the female regarding the enslaved community. Such a naming is false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false once again, because ‘motherhood’ is not perceived

in the prevailing social climate a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance (80).

This misnaming can easily be read from a 21st-century perspective, as mothers and children were trying to fit themselves into a mold of parenting that was carved out of patriarchy for white women. Hirsch proposes that “although it has outlived its viability, the oedipal family romance remains a cultural master narrative and reference point against which other ...theories and narratives, about family and about mothers...” are measured (93). Bondmothers could not accurately identify as matriarchs because of the systematic refusal of power. Enslaved women could not own themselves, and certainly not their own children. The confusion of such a distorted relationship with the power and control of not only one’s own body, but that of their children is a characteristic of bondmotherhood. Morrison tackles many of the perspectives of those women struggling with this mis-assignment by introducing multiple bonds shared between characters and systems.

Re-Locating Beloved: Identifying Beloved as a Bondmother

Considering that most of her works center around the imagined experiences of Black women, Morrison reconsiders how patriarchy and racism interfere with these characters ability to “mother” especially in the face of resistance. Parvin Ghasemi writes that even though Morrison “...sees motherhood as an important experience for women, she does not limit women's roles in the society to motherhood” (477). As the novel progresses Beloved makes several transitions in an effort to resist bondage. The most important change occurs when she is no longer ghost daughter of Sethe, but instead, becomes her mother. She slowly transitions into the role of authoritarian of 124. Her

sister Denver, who was slowly beginning to realize the transition described it as such, “At first they played together. A whole month and Denver loved it...how could it go wrong?—she let her guard down and it did...now the players were altered (Morrison 240). Denver has internalized blame for this transition although, considering the circumstances, it seems the altering of the players may have been inevitable. When Beloved’s narrative is offered she reveals that “I see her face which is mine...I have to have my face...I am looking for the join...I want to be the two of us...there is a house...Sethe’s face...is the place for me...now we can join” (Morrison 253). Her perspective here reveals a deep longing to not only rejoin her mother but to become her. Readers come to learn that this desire has come to fruition. Beloved, “dressed in Sethe’s dresses she...imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh, and used her body the same way...the way Sethe moved her hands, sighed...held her head...sometimes...it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who” (Morrison 241).

Beloved as maternal figure extends far beyond simply imitating Sethe, she used her horrifying experiences in “limbo” and as transatlantic slave captive to control Sethe and assert herself. Sethe told Beloved, “that her plan was for them to be together...forever... [but] Beloved wasn’t interested” (Morrison 241). In fact, “when once or twice Sethe tried to assert herself – be the unquestioned mother whose word was law and who knew what was best,” Beloved responded violently. Amanda Putnam notes that Morrison’s use of violence as a mode of resistance is normal. “The choice of violence often rendered upon those within their own community and family redirects powerlessness and transforms these characters...” (Putnam 26). Beloved’s powerlessness lies in her being trapped in an endless cycle of violence and death. In her transformation,

she was directing similar forms of control over Sethe. The transformation occurred silently as the women cleaned up the messes created after Beloved's tantrums and no one told her "You raise your hand to me and I will knock you into the middle of next week...Honor thy mother and father that thy days may be long...don't nobody work for you and God don't love ugly ways" (Morrison 243). During a conversation with Paul D, Denver responds to the question of whether or not Beloved was her sister with "...at times. At times I think she was—more (Morrison 266). This "more" refers not only to her supernatural state as ghost and time traveler but also to her role in the house. When Denver notes that "no one told Beloved to behave or threatened to knock her into next week", she is including herself. Not Beloved's sister and peer but certainly not her superior, Denver could not truly identify the kind of person that could claim the power she assumed her mother had.

The impact of this transition is present until the closing of the novel. Sethe has not yet stopped conflating herself with Beloved. The final lines of the novel are shared between Sethe and Paul D. He urges to Sethe "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." She responds only with "Me? Me?" (Morrison 273). Some critics would argue that this is a pivotal moment in Sethe reclaiming herself from Beloved's hold. Hirsch argues that this double question is actually a double assertion of herself and that the "me" is "not in the subject and object position I'm me but in the object position alone" (103). I propose instead that each of the "me's" are on behalf of each half of the whole woman that Beloved and Sethe together make up. As Beloved was not able to fully complete the transition of encompassing Sethe, and Sethe because of the attempted transition could not return to her own whole self.

The significance of this transition is that Beloved assumes not only the role of the mother in her and Sethe's relationship but also that of bondmother. Hirsch writes that enslaved mothers are "doubly subjected...to the institutions of family" and slavery, and I argue that each state problematize the other (Hirsch 94). For Beloved, "both" of her bonds to Sethe are steeped in resentment and further develop with the intention of restricting and eventually killing Sethe. The root of her resentment reflects the broken bond between herself and Sethe which she believes to have occurred at the time of her infanticide. However, their first maternal severance can be said to have occurred at the time of Sethe's rape and "milk-taking" at Sweet Home. Sethe says to Paul D. "All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me...those boys came in there and took my milk" (Morrison 20). Beloved's misunderstanding of the actual incident that severed their maternal relationship is a reflection of matriarchal mis-assignment.

Some critics may be hesitant to categorize Beloved as a bondmother, not because of her status as other-mother, but because of the "evil" way in which she functions. She fails to meet what most would consider the minimum standard of maternal behavior. An example of this failure to meet a minimum standard in mothering, including mother figures, is to protect one's offspring from all harm. On black maternity, Ghasemi suggests that black mothers have been "...mythologized and stereotyped as matriarchal figures, superbly strong and protective... demanding nothing or little, and totally self-sacrificing creatures whose identities are inseparable from their nurturing services" (477). This characterization is grossly over idealized because like any other character, a mother

figure, specifically one exposed to the horrors of slavery could be resentful and dangerous.

Scholars typically attribute these characteristics to the trope of the Bad Mother, “...she is all consumed and self-serving, the anti-maternal figure” (Ghasemi 477). Ghasemi further proposes that Morrison’s portrayal of motherhood is “...in conflict with the prevailing notion which tends to idealize motherhood, [she] questions the social construction of matriarchy and maternity which often fails to perceive the identity and individuality of a mother apart from her child” (477). For Morrison, these features further complicate her characters and reflect the actual complexity of human beings. She goes further and offers these “bad mothers” an opportunity to be fully examined for the crimes they commit by allowing them to speak for themselves. This includes allowing Beloved to share and speak about her multiple experiences with slavery.

Beloved’s attempted murder of Sethe is a slow and tortuous one, is best identified as an attempt at infanticide. Morrison allows her reader to understand from Beloved’s perspective her motivations for wanting to kill her “child.” From Beloved’s perspective, despite its disjointed nature, she identifies Sethe as not only a mother but as the repository of her trauma. After having her throat slit by Sethe, Beloved becomes the victim of multiple forms of pain all rooted in the horrors of slavery. When confronted by Paul D. Sethe tells him “I took my babies and put them where they’d be safe” (193). The “safe place” that Sethe claims to have sent her child, as Beloved is the only one murdered is false. Beloved becomes a captive on a transatlantic slave ship and in purgatory and an always abandoned child. There is no safety in any of her lives. In a moment of frustration Beloved shares the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of white men while aboard the

ship, "...he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there..." (Morrison 212). The only constant in each of the lives Beloved lives during her "exile" is Sethe herself. She sees "Sethe's" face on the slave ship as she is being tossed overboard, an extension of their maternal severance. She also sees her from behind clouds reliving the memories she has of Sethe. Beloved remembers her time on the slave ship "those able to die are in a pile...the woman is there with the face I want...the face that is mine...they fall into the sea...inside the woman with my face is inside the sea..." (249). She is haunted by the memory of Sethe in every new and traumatic life. The act of infanticide committed by Sethe does "buy her and the children a form of freedom" except Beloved (Morrison 7).

In an effort to resist her own bondage, Sethe severs maternal ties between herself and Beloved by slitting her throat. Most readings of the novel suggest that Beloved, a figure of the past has haunted Sethe for eighteen years and appears in physical form to harm her further. In that case Beloved is the physical manifestation of the trauma of slavery that cannot be escaped. However, a re-reading of the role reversal of Sethe and Beloved reveals that she too has been haunted by Sethe and in fact her goal in the physical world is to exorcise Sethe. In her discussion of *Paradise* O'Reilly purports that "exorcisms give rise to rebirth; cleansed and purified the women are baptized into a new self and world... reborn, these women, as the text tells us, "were no longer haunted" (192). Exorcising Sethe and being reborn might offer Beloved a new non-haunted existence. Marianne Hirsch asked, "How much more unusual to have...a maternal narrative haunted by the ghost of a child. Through such role reversal of generational continuity...Morrison allows us to look at women's writing from the...perspective of maternal subjectivity" (93). Through another role reversal (of Beloved as the haunted

mother and Sethe as the *hauntee*) Morrison provides the opportunity for multiple understandings of generational trauma as experienced by bondmothers.

Beloved's role of bondmother to Sethe is not enough in her attempts at exorcising her. The final question and line of the text, "me, me?" highlights the closeness of Beloved's success in exorcising Sethe from the role of mother. Her ultimate failure can be attributed to her inability to connect to like women from the surrounding community. Hirsch argues that "the maternal subject in [*Beloved*] becomes the repository for the most repressed, the most unspeakable cultural memories and narratives" (96). As a maternal subject, this is a fitting description for the way in which Beloved is regarded by the community. Ella who had "been beaten every way but down remembered...a hairy white thing she would not nurse...fathered by the lowest yet...The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working, and then Ella hollered" (259). The hairy white thing for Ella is the child fathered by her nightmarish abusers. She is angered at the thought of it coming "back to whip her" in the way that a haunt or parent might "whip" their child. This reading of Beloved as a repository of trauma leaves her open to abuse. Rose Garland-Thompson says of disability "constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance, the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control, and identity" (6). Garland-Thompson's assertions about the body that is different being susceptible to a deviant identifier ring true in the case of Beloved. She too is read as a construction of deviant forces, albeit spiritual ones. Her pregnant body is the local community's repository for anxieties about their own vulnerability to haunting/hunting spirits from their pasts and perhaps the lack of their own control over haints. Because of this Beloved

becomes a victim like the women around her. When she, like Sethe, publicly resists bondage with their children they are viewed as evil and undeserving of pity.

The women of the community who worked to heal and sustain each other until Sethe's crime are a part of a lineage of bondmothers that maintain a set of familiar characteristics. Most of the women of the community have had a set of experiences that are unique to bondmothers. The women have violently severed maternal ties between themselves and their children to resist further bondage. For example, Ella choosing not to nurse the child born out of her continued torture (Morrison 259). For Sethe, she experienced a "social exile" after her release from jail for having murdered Beloved (Morrison 208). The women all also relive specific traumas that impacted their ability to "mother." For Sethe, it was her rape and "milk-taking". The denial of her children their sustenance was one that occurred specifically because of her position as an enslaved mother, or bondmother. In Ella's case, it was the awareness of the pregnancy itself. The one facet of this theory that affords closure to the women impacted is the necessity of a communal healing from like women.

Beloved was successful in adhering to all of the other "requirements" necessary to ensuring her success. She desired to sever the maternal ties that developed between herself and Sethe in order to ensure her freedom as an un-haunted mother. This severance, unlike the one that caused her early demise happens slowly, revealing a seemingly tortuous consumption of Sethe's body and mind. In her limited time as first person speaker, she reveals her experiences following her death. She tells readers that she was a captive on a transatlantic slave ship "always crouching the man on my face is dead...some who eat nasty themselves...the men without skin bring us morning

water...daylight comes through the cracks...he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there... (212). She tells Sethe these experiences, each time reliving the trauma of their having occurred. It is the final corner of the bondmother experience that Beloved is denied, communal healing. The repression and anger of the manifestation of the traumas of slavery that she reflects the ways in which she was regarded by the community of Ohio and by scholars engaged with the text.

The traditional reading of *Beloved* is that she functioned as “memory itself...the story of slavery come back to confront the community whose future until that point had been to keep the past at bay, the community that had been trying not to remember” (Hirsch 105). *Beloved* had not come back to force the memory of the past onto the community at all. She was with her own pregnancy possibly back to reclaim a generational legacy of infanticide supported by the horrors of slavery. It was Sethe who represented the memory of slavery, carrying it with her always in the tree on her back. Morrison has Amy describe the scar to Sethe “It’s a tree Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk it’s red and split wide open, full of sap...you got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too...and dern if these ain’t blossoms...Your back got a whole tree on it...” (18). If *Beloved* as bondmother was centered Sethe’s actions can be read as the resurgence of old memories. It was Sethe who forced the horror of the memories of maternal severance upon all of the women of the community when her desire to free herself from the bondage of her role as bondmother led her to murder own “not yet walking” baby girl. The community of the town had exiled her for that resurgence of memories in an effort to keep her and the memories she carried at bay. *Beloved*, however,

also pregnant and having assumed this role was incorrectly assumed as being this “living past” instead of as the potential for the future.

Beloved and her baby’s acceptance could have represented a change in the way that her family traditionally handled children who represented trauma. Like her grandmother before her, Beloved’s mother killed some of her children in an effort to resist the bondage of slavery. Beloved would go on to commit a similar act of infanticide against Sethe, although the birth of her newest child could represent the beginning of a new legacy. Had she and the child she was pregnant with been accepted and allowed to live, they might have changed the generational legacy of this family to one without infanticide as a mode of resistance.

When Hirsch wrote, “*Beloved*...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...” she was referring to Sethe (95). And although Morrison certainly does allow Sethe to speak as a mother she also allows her to suffer and grieve and haunt as her child did. It is the reversal of the places of Sethe and Beloved that offers characters and readers alike this opportunity to experience all sides of the traumatic effects of slavery in no less than four different ways. For clarification, the four ways come from Sethe and Beloved both occupying two different roles mother and daughter twice. Readers are able to understand through Beloved, that the enslaved mother, was without power.

The experiences of women in bondage, particularly those of the enslaved do not reflect modern maternal standards of being. The circumstances of their mothering supported their master’s intention of increasing their property value. In her autobiography, Harriet Jacobs wrote, “Women are considered of no value, unless they

continually increase their owner's stock. They were put on par with animals" (49). Meaning that her fate was to live and die in the manner of a penned animal. She was expected to maintain maternal sensibilities in nurturing the child to health but held no power if for example, the child was to be sold. Although infanticide is a terrible sacrifice, the constraints of slavery do not allow for a modern maternal reading of the act itself or the mother responsible. Attempting to commit an act of infanticide obviously works in direct opposition to traditional tenets of mothering but it is not so unusual for a character's in Morrison's text. This is because Morrison's mothers are "...often independent, strong, determined (to a degree that they are sometimes abusive), and self-seeking" (Ghasemi 477). Because of the bondmother's inability to truly demonstrate actual power Beloved fails in her attempts to replace Sethe as mother and break the generational curse of bondmotherhood that has been an integral part of their family history.

This "open" reading of the responsibility of mothers is examined through Morrison's characters Sethe and Beloved. The two women are self-centered, as in centered on their own "for self" freedom. The writing of these characters is initially non-traditional as a separation of the needs of the mother do not simply break away from those of the child, but they may be read as in fact above them. It is with this non-traditional mode of reading that Denver can successfully be imagined as another bondmother.

Denver, a Heroine? : Examining Denver's Role as a Bondmother

Like Beloved, the similarities between Denver and Sethe as mother underscores the meaning of their bond. A "binding agreement" exists between the two, one that

demands reciprocity in the face of fear, oppression, and even ghosts. According to the legalities of slavery, that determine the status of her children, Sethe's deliverance of Denver during her escape to freedom means that Denver too is a fugitive slave.

According to prevailing legal doctrine "...partis sequitur ventrem, a child follows the political condition of its mother regardless of that status of its father" (Simm 891). Sethe saved Denver from slavery and its brutality by giving birth on her journey to freedom. Sethe highlights this scenario by retelling Denver the story of her birth at her request. By sharing, she reveals her the traumatic experiences from her time as a slave.

By sharing the details of her attack in the barn at Sweet Home, Sethe reveals not only her personal trauma but the potential trauma she spared Denver. When talking to Paul D, she tells him for the first time about the brutal attack she suffered at the hands of Schoolteacher and, "them boys," his nephews. "They used cowhide on you? And they took my milk. They beat you and you was pregnant? And they took my milk" (17)! In this section Paul D repeatedly interrupts Sethe's story with other physical abuses that Sethe could have experienced. Her needing to repeat that her milk was taken, which was a physical and emotional rape, is one that he cannot fully understand. At least not as well as if she were beaten with a cowhide whip. By yelling and repeating that her attack also included her milk taking Sethe expands the larger conversation about enslaved women's specific abuses, in a way that Paul D was obviously not used to. In *Ties That Bind*, Tiya Miles writes about how Black women were always subject to suffer under the whim of men, regardless of their consent. Miles says "To be an enslaved woman in America was to be utterly exposed to sustained and systematic violation . . . Against this violence, the law offered no protection; American society offered no protection . . ." (46). The

historical lack of autonomy of Black women extends through their inability to consent to sexual relations with anyone other than the person that desired her.

The necessity of sharing her experiences at Sweet Home and her escape, allows Sethe to reveal what could be read as one-half of an undetermined bargain. As Denver was the most direct recipient of the rewards of Sethe's risk, she received freedom, avoided abuse at the hands of a sadistic master, and escaped death. It seems reasonable to assume that the responsibility she felt towards Sethe as she transitioned into the role of child, may also have been rooted in some sort of obligation. Unlike Beloved, Denver's transition into the role of maternal figure did not occur with mocking or an exchange of clothing. Her transition occurred out of necessity for survival.

Denver's transition reflects the theoretical citing of "perverse surrogacy". Denver now, "...served them both. Washing cooking, forcing, cajoling her mother to eat..." (250). Bondmothers often participated in this perverse surrogacy in order to ensure their own and others' survival (usually mental and emotional). The bondmother, as surrogate, is born out of slavery's destabilizing and traumatic force. The development of these relationships benefited slaves superficially, while only the system of slavery actually profits. In this case, Beloved as representative of the oppressive nature of slavery is benefitting from both of the other women in the household. From Sethe, she receives a guilt-ridden playmate that will accept her abuse. From Denver, she receives the maternal care that their mother once furnished. Denver who begins to alter herself to accommodate the needs of her changed household unwittingly follows a traditional presentation of Black women. hooks writes "When we look back at the history of black women, from slavery to the present day, we see ourselves represented first and foremost as inferior

beasts of burden, compelled by circumstance to serve the needs of others” (91). This quote from hooks reflects Denver’s new role as mother and the generational experiences of the women that came before her. Sevonna Brown writes, “hooks pronounces the ways black women’s bodies have been looked to for nurturing not unto themselves but for the survival and benefit of other people. The mother is consumed by the energies and desires of others” (7). In order to avoid cementing Denver in this category Morrison develops resistance within her. Each bondmother presented has wrestled to gain control over at least one of the tentacles of oppression that is strangling her. They do so, by following a pattern that begins with maternal severance.

Denver as bondmother seeks to free herself and her mother from Beloved’s grips. Morrison writes “Whatever was happening...neither Beloved nor Sethe seemed to care...Denver knew it was on her” (243). Sethe was able to free herself and Denver from slavery with the help of a supernatural being, Amy. Amy in this instance can be read as a supernatural being as the circumstances surrounding her role is fantastical according to other characters. According to Ella, Amy the “whitegirl” that Sethe claims to have spent time with and received help from was, in fact, a ghost. Ella demands “...how she have that baby out there in them woods by herself? Said a whitewoman come out the trees and held her...I know what kind of white it was...anything floating around in the woods...I don’t want no part of” (187). Denver’s experience with helpful, otherworldly beings occurred similarly. Denver, who was struggling with leaving her mother and Beloved alone in the house stood on their porch, hesitant and afraid. It was then that she heard the voice of Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs began to laugh “...you don’t remember nothing I told you about how come I walk the way I do...go out in the yard. Go on...” (244). Baby

Suggs like, Amy is a “godsend” that serve to aid bonded mothers by giving them comfort and assurance in the face of fear. In the same way, that Amy rubbed the life back into her feet, which helped her to continue on her journey, Baby Suggs words afford Denver the kind of comfort that she used to travel into town. Eventually, this leaving is the first act of separation that occurs between Sethe and Denver. This separation headed by Denver can be read as a non-violent act of maternal severance.

This maternal severance, between Denver and Sethe, occurs for two reasons. The first is that Denver cannot exist as both mother and daughter to Sethe who has, “lost her mind” (Morrison 242). Secondly because in order get help she must be able to connect with the women from the community. The bondmother pattern that she is following calls for a communal healing from like women. The women must both be alike and like the bondmother enough to come to her aid. In order to best connect with them, she presents herself as head of the household. Willing to work and sacrifice in order to provide her family with at least the basic necessities. The women, who connected with Sethe as mother and fugitive slave disassociated themselves from her after she committed infanticide. However, Denver in Sethe’s role has taken on the task of matriarchal figure of the household, despite her actual distance from the two women. This makes her relatable and readily acceptable within their own segregated community. The first twenty pages of text the audience learns just how intensely the loneliness in 124 had been. As a child, Denver could not make connections because of her mother’s past, but as a mother she could. In a fit of jealousy and loneliness, Denver speaks out, “...shaking and sobbing so she could not speak. The tears she had not shed for nine years...I can’t live

here...nobody speaks to us...comes by... (Morrison 14). However, Denver's non-violent severance and presentation of Sethe as harmless, like a child, relaxes the women.

Despite these differences, the women from the community who initially shunned Sethe can come to her rescue because they too have experienced similar systematic abuse as a result of chattel slavery. Their coming to Sethe's aid, on behalf of Denver, signifies her social redemption and a communing of bondmothers. A communing made possible because of the bond shared between the many women. In fact, Ella, one of those most against Sethe initially helps lead the charge and come to her aid. Although the child she refused to nurse died quickly, it functioned as a reminder of the system that chained her. Morrison describes the communing of women, all bonded through slavery and bonding through this experience as, "thirty neighborhood women. Some had their eyes closed; others looked at the...sky...the voices of women searched for the right combination...building voice upon voice until they found it...a wave of sound wide...it broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash (Morrison 261). This "baptism" of Sethe, is a figurative rebirth occurring between her and Denver. Like "breaking water," Sethe is being delivered by the women like midwives ushering in a new life unto Denver. Hirsch cites a similar reading of the scenario. "When the community women return to help Sethe send Beloved back to the other side, Sethe is born once again" (107). This rebirth is only possible because Denver sought them out, like a mother in need. The trauma of this childbirth, painful and influenced by slavery mirrors Sethe's own child-birthing experience.

Conclusion

Marianne Hirsch imagined, ironically in her examination of *Beloved*, “what model or definition of subjectivity might be derived from a theory that began with mothers rather than children” (94). My argument is that Morrison’s bondmothers are the literary response to such a theory. Because the bondmother can be interpreted so many different ways, sometimes a more focused analysis of the bonds shared between the women allows for the most in-depth look into the complexity of the characters and the women they were based upon.

The realities of bondmothers is that they are neither good nor evil. Like their title suggests they are simultaneously operating with multiple meanings. It is because of this that Denver’s assumption of the role of mother is not one that can be read as purely positive, nor *Beloved*’s attempts as negative. Although she does “rescue” Sethe from *Beloved* it does not come without great costs. Perhaps even, reading *Beloved* as bondmother could rescue her from her typical villainous assignment and afford her scholarly sympathy akin to Sethe’s. Like all other bondwomen, Denver is left to deal with the traumatic scars of slavery regardless of her “victory.”

What Morrison’s texts reveal to us is that within the confines of bondage particularly when motherhood is a factor, choice is such a limited factor that redefining one’s perceptions of freedom based on the restrictive system is the only option. Timothy Spaulding “For the slave narrator, the notion of a free identity involves both an internal and external dynamic...even when she gains the internal sense of a free identity, the external world operates in opposition to that self, making freedom always a deferred and conditional concept” (10). The external and internal dynamics that complicate the bondmother’s sense of freedom are problematized because with birth she is responsible

for multiple identities, all of whom are her responsibility and yet are legally not hers.

Despite the many ways that each “mother” in the text functions as property, fugitive or slave, they are all bound to each other and the system of slavery.

CHAPTER 2

BELOVED IS DIVINE: TRACING THE BONDMOTHER PATTERN INTO TONI MORRISON'S PARADISE

“...*come celebrate with me that everyday something has tried to kill me and has failed.*”

Lucille Clifton, “won’t you celebrate with me”

In 1993 Toni Morrison was awarded The Nobel Prize in Literature. According to the Nobel Prize site description, Morrison’s work belongs to someone “who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality” (para.1). The first book after her award was the novel *Paradise* which was marketed as the ending of the trilogy she had been penning for almost a decade. The novel is about violence, motherhood, and community. When rejected women begin to gather and heal their emotional and physical scars at a former Convent, tensions between them and neighboring townsmen grow until a massacre results. Despite the accolade of a Nobel Prize, endorsement from Oprah Winfrey, and a feature film for the previously published *Beloved*, *Paradise* was being rejected by the public. Following its release, *US News & World* published an article noting some of these complaints. On behalf of the magazine Anna Murline wrote, “Initial reviews for *Paradise* have been less than stellar. While praising the book's lush lyricism, critics have noted heavy-handed foreshadowing and contrived plot devices...casual readers may struggle with Morrison's writing, which often combines...magic realism [and]... convoluted plotting” (para. 7). One of the most scathing articles of the time said that *Paradise* was, “...everything that “*Beloved*” was

not: it's a heavy-handed, schematic piece of writing, thoroughly lacking in the novelistic magic Ms. Morrison has wielded so effortlessly in the past. It's a contrived, formulaic book that mechanically pits men against women...the past against the present (Kakutani para 3.)” Another issue that some critics had with the novel was that because it was marketed as the end of a trilogy, along with *Beloved* and *Jazz* and thus, literary connections should have been easier to make. These complaints would remain a part of the literary history of *Paradise*.

Although they may not be as obvious as *Beloved* and *Jazz*, *Paradise* does have familiar themes to connect it to the rest of the collection. For example, like *Beloved* the ending of *Paradise* has “...an out of time experience... [has] a mystical ending ... [and] suggests that women can move forward, go through windows and doors and address the past, the ghosts that haunt them” (Bennet 51). It is the overarching theme of *Paradise*, the survival of haunted women, that answers the public's question about how the works connect. One of the “haunting ghosts” that permeates the texts are broken mother-daughter relationships. Judas Bennet writes that “although Morrison says *Paradise* explores religious love, it is as much about mothers and maternal love as *Beloved*. It is...about the absences of maternal love, about missing mothers and the profound effect this has on our destinies” (56). It is this connection between the *Beloved* and *Paradise* that I aim to explore. The relationship shared between mothers and their daughters certainly, affects the “destinies” of the characters. In both texts, each of the women allowed a voice is either a mother or has a complicated relationship with her mother. In *Paradise* specifically, those relationships or lack thereof are what spur the eventual communing of this group of women. Although Bennet’s comment is accurate, I would

suggest that her reference to “missing mothers” can be extended to include mothers who are missing and are not available to serve as maternal figures, and are missed by their daughters because of this lack of maternal connection.

Both *Beloved* and *Paradise* have a familiar singular matriarchal focus. Most scholarship has focused only on the development of the maternal behaviors of matriarchal figures in Morrison’s texts and not on their daughter’s displays of maternal behavior. Their place in the text is consistently read in relation to their interactions with the prevailing mother figure. In the case of *Beloved*, both Denver and Beloved are usually read solely as Sethe’s daughters despite their maternal development as discussed in chapter one. In *Paradise*, all except one of the central group’s characters receive similar treatment and are always discussed in relation to their spiritual leader Consolata, also called Connie. The usual scholarship surrounding the other women of *Paradise* has been centered solely on their development of sisterly bonds among one another. Most notably the development of these bonds and their usefulness in helping one another heal from their traumatic pasts. Although the reading of Connie as spiritual leader is accurate, decades of focus on Connie has dimmed the importance of some of the other women in the convent, except Mavis.

Mavis, another well-studied character has managed to generate some critical engagement. As an acknowledged mother, discussion of her maternal role(s) generally focuses on her “abandonment” of her older children and the mysterious death of her twin babies. After Connie, she is also second in age and helps to maintain some order when Connie is too inebriated. Both of these characters have been well studied and have obvious support from the text to ground most scholars’ assertions. However re-engaging

with *Paradise* while still centering on Connie and Mavis as default maternal figures does nothing to complicate the scholarship on the text. If however another character, generally treated as “minor,” were evaluated for her maternal contributions two important things could occur: (1) a re-examination of a particular character's maternal value, which scholars may have previously overlooked and (2) a recognition of Morrison's commitment to challenging notions of traditional Black motherhood.

The character that should be used to further this discussion is Pallas also referred to as Divine. Although Pallas is certainly not the only character in the text that could be read as a bondmother she is often overlooked in terms of maternal scholarship, despite serving an important role within the text. Although she is often mentioned as an example of a victim and survivor of intense trauma this it is done with final emphasis being given to Connie's spiritual leadership spiritual leadership capabilities. What often goes overlooked though is that she grows immensely in the novel as an individual and as a mother.

Neither Pallas nor Beloved has been given full maternal study. This is not to say that either of them has been totally ignored in literary conversation. They are consistently written about in scholarship, but only as daughters. This treatment of the characters places them in a subordinate role and the mother figure in a superior one. In order to deter this treatment of the characters, I would argue that the best way to offer Pallas more critical attention would be to identify her as an extension of Beloved, and thusly as a bondmother. A comparison of Pallas and Beloved's fulfillment of the pattern of bondmotherhood would be the most useful in marking connecting the characters and text.

Morrison's Understudies

One reason that reading Pallas's character in this way may not have occurred before is because of a familiar trend of understating the importance of minor characters in Morrison's work. The singular matriarchal focus that has left Pallas overlooked as a potential maternal figure is related to the presentations of the matriarch in African-American literature. This treatment of the matriarch does not usually allow room for multiple maternal figures to be "centered" at a given time. For Amy and Pallas, this means that when scholars read their characterization through a lens that aims to assign matriarchal value there is only room for one, a lead maternal figure. This is not an unusual approach as this easily meshes with the changing hierarchy of the text. In *Beloved*, Amy may have been read as a lead maternal figure during her brief relationship with Sethe, but Sethe gives birth and establishes herself as literal maternal figure. Baby Suggs, initially matriarch of 124, eventually "loses hope and faith," and dies leaving Sethe to take on her role. Similarly in *Paradise*, when Mother Magnus dies, Connie takes on her role but while she is incapacitated, Mavis takes care of Connie and other women. This pattern goes on throughout both novels, offering evidence for the singular matriarch approach.

Although that is the traditional approach to matriarchal study in most works, it is exclusionary. Bennet writes about *Paradise*, "It is ... [an] absence that drives Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas to flee the past, and it is the absence of mother love that drives Connie, who has been passive for most of the novel, to action" (56). Bennet, like most scholars, recognizes the absence of not just mothers but their love as Connie transitions from passive to active. It is the second half of this point that holds the historical flaw. Connie is centered as the mother-figure for those other women because she takes the

action that heals them all. Bennet recognizes this treatment of her character as being flawed. Of Connie, Bennet writes that “spurred into action, she becomes a caricature of the strong matriarch, a mystical dictator who leads the women into a healing ritual and through doors that have been previously closed” (56). Bennet’s word choice here, “caricature of the strong matriarch” reflects Hortense Spiller’s theory of matriarchal mis-assignment as presented in chapter one.

Referring back to the earlier quote about the mis-assignment of matriarchy to enslaved Black women Spillers writes, “...the dominant culture, in a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong; actually misnames the power of the female regarding the enslaved community” (80). This naming cannot work because the bonded mother could not, in fact, claim her child as wholly her own. In this case, this naming of Connie as mystical matriarch is also false, despite *Paradise’s* setting in the 1970s. She cannot, in fact, lay claim to these women, even if she so desired. As their spiritual leader, Connie’s role is to guide the women to a place of self-sufficient healing. It is also important to note that although Connie is not an African-American woman she is Afro-Latina, and therefore does fit within the discussion of mis-assignment. Connie herself describes her introduction to the all Black citizens of Ruby as “familiar”. She says “As Consolata watched that reckless joy...Then a memory of just skin and just such men...and although they were living here...not in a loud city of glittering black people, Consolata knew them” (*Paradise* 226). As a woman of African descent, she is denied full access to the role of all powerful matriarch as she cannot truly protect the women and girls in the house from oppressive forces beyond their home.

This discussion of mis-named power is one that permeates the entire novel. In addressing these issues, "...*Paradise* seems especially concentrated on myths of matriarchy and how intertwined they are with so many other myths of women" (Bennet 56). This categorization, of singular leading maternal figure, is limiting to both Connie and the other women in the convent. The title and responsibility of "matriarch" forces her into one category, and the other women into another and subordinate one. "Why must she eclipse the others, asking all of them to speak in chorus?" (Bennet 1) In this quote, Bennet was invoking a discussion of Morrison's most famous ghost Beloved, but I would extend it generally to scholar's treatment of Connie as the only mother. Why must discussion of the maternal relationships that occur within text center repeatedly around the same characters? Why do their stories eclipse all others? One reason for this repetitive treatment of Morrison's characters is because of a lack of categories into which to move them. The characters are being placed in the only available categories for maternal relationships, mother or daughter.

Amy of *Beloved* is comparable to Pallas because she has also received minimal scholarly attention despite her value as care-giver to other characters. In *Beloved*, "... the white "slave," Amy Denver, helps Sethe to cross the river to freedom and acts as a midwife for Beloved the birth of Denver" (Krumholz 399). Some scholars read her as having been an apparition, and her appearance in the novel however brief, was instrumental in ensuring Sethe's escape was safe. In fact, it was with Amy's supernatural help that Sethe was able to give birth to Denver (her namesake) safely. Amy massaged Sethe's feet "back to life" and pointed her in the right direction as she trekked to freedom (Morrison 42). In the short time that they were together, Amy even helped Sethe find

beauty in the collection of scars that others would later view only as ugly. Sethe told Paul D, “Whitegirl. That’s what she called it...A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves...Could have branches for all I know” (Morrison 18). Despite her brief and yet tremendous role in the aid and protection of two major characters, Sethe, and Denver, she remains overshadowed by Sethe and Beloved’s interactions. Even though there have been many texts discussing maternity as a major theme within the novel she is never acknowledged for having “mothered” either Denver or Sethe. In a similar vein, neither is Pallas despite her obvious maternal functions, like having given birth in the text.

In order to develop new scholarship, this literary eclipsing must be curbed. By centering a minor character and examining her role as mother Morrison’s growth in her treatment of maternity will be revealed. The character that would be most useful for this discussion is Pallas. Sometimes called Divine, Pallas is sixteen years old and pregnant upon her first visit to the convent. She ran away from her wealthy father with Carlos, her high school’s janitor, and visited her estranged artist mother. After a series of intensely traumatic incidents, Pallas is delivered to the convent, leaves, and later returns. Because of major differences in setting Pallas’s connection to *Beloved* seems quite distant. However, upon closer inspection, Pallas’s experience reveal multiple connections to character Beloved. The two have some obvious similarities, both are the youngest women in their dysfunctional households, become pregnant in the text, feel betrayed their mothers and are cited in scholarship always as a daughter.

As noted previously, neither character has been given full maternal study especially Pallas. This is not to say that she has been totally ignored in literary conversation. Beyond her categorization as one of Connie’s spiritual daughters, her

relationship with her birth mother was one doused in betrayal. Her characterization has become vested in her consistent identification as a daughter of the text. This type of reference happened with Beloved and led to her consistent reference as Sethe's *haint* daughter born naturally of her. But she has also been cited as having a metaphorical mother, Denver, as argued in chapter one. In the previous chapter, I posited that this treatment of Beloved as only a daughter has an adverse effect when examining her role in the novel. In order to deter this treatment of the characters, I would argue that the best way to offer Pallas more critical attention would be to identify her as an extension of Beloved, and bondmother. A comparison of Pallas and Beloved's fulfillment of the pattern of bondmotherhood would be the most useful in marking connecting the characters and text.

In "What Would Be on the Other Side" Melanie Anderson asks what if Beloved, the specter, were read as a "...type of character readers should notice throughout the novels, not just as the beloved, but rather as a figure of spectrality mediating personal and cultural history?" (308) Beloved is a type, or rather a trope, permeating both novels as bondmother. Beloved is an unconventional presentation of motherhood in unspeakable circumstances, She is the predecessor of the women in the convent. She is not however, their archetype for finality. The women, like Beloved are vilified and attacked in the hopes that they will be exorcised from the space of the community. But Morrison offers Beloved another maternal opportunity, to live and expand her role as bondmother through Pallas.

One reason for this is because the bondmother category is in its earliest stages of development, it would be useful for the reader to have an organized frame of reference.

Also, because the bondmother was developed out of my desire to establish a category for mothers that allows for the examination of counter mother figures, Pallas's status as teenager with eating disorder can be highlighted. Therefore she can be read as a rape victim and teenage mother without being vilified or victimized. According to the bondmother theory, there are multiple ways to "mother," beyond the traditional notions of motherhood. Just as *Beloved* and *Denver* offered different presentations of motherhood in the ways that they interact with Sethe, so does Pallas. Lastly, the continued development of the bondmother is necessary because it allows marginal characters space for non-judgmental examination. This space would be inaccessible to them both if they continue to be read in the shadows of daughterhood.

The necessity of re-reading Pallas is obvious, but the application of her new role as bondmother is not. A bondmother is a category for a Black woman that is a mother, naturally or as surrogate, whose body is "marked" the narrative of slavery. The definition requires a direct relationship with slavery, which as a young, wealthy Black woman living in the 1970s Pallas does not have. This reading of Pallas reflects one that is disconnected from *Paradise's* ancestry, *Beloved*. Pallas is an extension of *Beloved* sharing many qualities, wholly differing in others. This connection when outlined by a comparison of the experiences of the two reveals a familiar pattern of behavior. This set of behaviors includes maternal severance, social exile, and relived trauma. For those mothers that exhibit each of these traits, they may be presented with an opportunity to receive communal healing from like women.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the category bondmother is most useful for describing the state of enslaved mothers. I would argue though that this category could be

used in order to accommodate the experiences of oppressed Black mothers in *Paradise* as well. More than anything else the term bondmother seeks to create a space that highlights the experiences of oppressed Black mothers. This is of course why the term is so useful in highlighting the experiences of Black women that were oppressed by slavery.

Morrison's continued examination of oppression among Black mothers reflects a desire to examine its impact on women and their most intimate relationships. After the abolition of slavery, there was a historical transition in the mode of bondage used to control the behavior of Black women. Including lynching, Jim Crow laws, and sexual violence.

Morrison used her fiction to track these oppressive developments with *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*. Toni Morrison's trilogy "... characterizes her intention of incorporating the presence of African Americans in American history and literature" (35). Together the three texts offer a "... a saga of African Americans from the beginning of slavery to the late 20th century" (Mori 35). Morrison's decision to immerse the ending of the saga in violence reflects her understanding of the period's social climate.

Morrison's *Paradise* is a fictional case study of the refusal of women to be silenced by their wilted mother-daughter experiences or vengeful patriarchy. Pallas follows in the tradition of *Beloved*, being driven to action by similar feelings of her mother's betrayal. Despite their many similarities, Morrison used *Beloved*'s "failure" to create a paradise within 124 in order to mold another daughter, Pallas, in her image. Although it occurred almost a decade later, Pallas's strong personality would come to rely on *Beloved*'s weaknesses. By tracking Pallas's movement within the bondmother pattern and using *Beloved* as a "guide," readers can identify Morrison's maternal treatment of traumatized women. Melanie Anderson writes, "Abused and outcast women

are silent, social ghosts haunting the margins of society, but within their marginality, these characters can discover a power that is healing but not socially accepted” (308). The development of this power is one that Pallas was afforded via her role as an extension of Beloved.

Maternal Severance

If a bondmother identifies her child as a factor strengthening her bond to an oppressive system she might seek to violently sever maternal ties between herself and that child. It is important to note, that this severance need not be physically violent. Maternal severance can take the form of abandonment, emotional detachment, or other forms of detachment of the connection between mother and child. With the character Beloved, her mother Sethe in an effort to prevent the re-enslavement of herself and her children slit her daughter’s throat. Beloved, as mother to Sethe, similarly severed ties with Sethe, albeit slowly. Maternal severance is the elimination of the connection between mother and child and can occur at the hands of outside forces. Although the circumstances of the setting are different from those of *Beloved*, the severance of maternal ties by death permeates both novels.

The townsmen came to the convent with the intention of not just banishing the women from the vicinity of Ruby but to exorcise them. The definition of exorcise, is to drive out (an evil spirit) from a person or place. The men viewed the women of the convent as being similar to witches claiming that they “...didn’t need men and they didn’t need God” (Morrison 276). Not needing men or God is the equivalent of witchcraft to a patriarchal community proud of the belief that they were what caused God to “frown” his brow. These men, led by ego and religious extremism were prepared to

exorcise the women without regard. This means that the men would eagerly murder the new mother Pallas and possibly her child. They were so committed to their decision to “exorcise” the women from the Convent that they were disconnected from reality. They mistook lipstick for blood and the signs of a new life (crib and toys) for markers of death. “The men are so set on interpreting the women as evil that they blatantly misinterpret evidence in the Convent while they are stalking the women...” (Anderson 316). This accusatory treatment of the not only the women but of Pallas’s child reflects the distorted obsession that the men have developed. During their raid of the Convent, “...what alarms the two men most is the series of infant booties and shoes ribboned to a cord hanging from a crib in the last bedroom they enter. A teething ring, cracked and stiff, dangles among the tiny shoes...he...moves closer to the... baby shoes. Looking for what? More evidence? He isn’t sure” (Morrison 8). This man, armed and prepared to kill unarmed women recognizes the possibility of motherhood among the women and chooses not to abandon the “hunt” but instead to continue on in pursuit of his cause.

This willingness to exterminate the maternal bond, by possibly harming the child, also occurred in *Beloved*. Prior to the singing of the hymn that causes Beloved to disappear from the porch of 124, she is described as being with child. Beloved is described as having been a “...devil child... taken the shape of a pregnant woman...her belly big and tight...her smile was dazzling” (Morrison 308). Despite their ability to identify her pregnancy, the women still chose to move forward with dispelling her from the home. These are the same women from a community that isolated Sethe for having committed infanticide a decade before. Ella, leader of the group of women thought Sethe too, “...prideful... misdirected and ...complicated” upon her release from jail (Morrison

302). The women who resented Sethe's decision stood before her porch and worked together to banish Beloved, and her child. They were able to do so and applaud themselves because of their recognition of Beloved as a demon or devil. Similarly, the townsmen in *Paradise* were led to execute the Convent women because of a suspicion that they performed abortions and tortured children. It is the righteousness of each group that comforts them in their decision to sever the bond between mother and child.

Although Pallas serves as an extension of Beloved, Morrison has chosen to strengthen her as bondmother. Beloved, who stood on the porch before the mob of women come to banish her was essentially at their whim. Like a child herself, she stood "...naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun...thunder black and glistening she stood on long straight legs...vines of hair twisted all over hair. Jesus" (308). Her description reads as though she were totally unaware of the intentions of the women, naked before them. Wearing a crown of twisted vines, unknowingly prepared to be martyred like Jesus. Like Jesus Christ, Beloved would "rise again" in Paradise as Pallas. Unlike her ancestor before her, Pallas was prepared to fight for both her life and her child's.

The attack scene between the five women and raiding men reveals a group of women who went unconquered. Morrison describes the scene "...the women are trapped and know it...an alabaster ashtray slams into Arnold's temple...she continues to smash until he is down on all fours...while Jeff...a cue stick cracks his wrist... and then ...rams into his jaw..." (286). The scene continues with images of men maimed by stab wounds, and one being temporarily blinded. Although it is not clear which of the women Pallas is, she is one of the three fighting for her life and those of the people who are now her

family. As Morrison does not specify which women take what action an explanation for this conclusion would be appropriate. Readers can clearly identify Consolata as one of the three not fighting because she is identified by eye color upon being shot in the head by one of the townsmen. The other woman, the White Girl, who is shot first and wounded during the fight is Mavis. Later, after the women have escaped the massacre Mavis winces in pain after receiving a hug from her estranged daughter Sal, possibly because of her gunshot wound. Also, during her initial description, she is written as being small enough to wear her daughter's clothes. In fact, she flees her home wearing her daughter's yellow rain boots, and rain coat which suggests that she has a frame small enough to be mistaken for a child's (Morrison 27). This is clear because the White Girl who is shot is described as having small wrists, like a child. Morrison allows Pallas to both resist and prevail against the attempted maternal severance between herself and her child by offering her not only protection, but the will to fight.

Social Exile

This need to fight is predicated on the actions taken by the local townsmen of Ruby. The false restoration of Ruby that the townsmen sought out was a murderous attempt at making their community "safe" again. Ironically, the peace they were moved to kill for destroyed the comfort of the convent for the women. The convent was a safe haven for the tortured women. As a haven for healing the convent was one that Pallas returned to on two occasions. After trying to readjust to life with her father, Pallas returned to the Convent for, "...just a visit...just to find out how everybody was..." (Morrison 255). This double return to the Convent occurred out of her desire to escape emotionally overwhelming familial situations. In the first case, she wanted to escape the

scene of her mother and Carlos making love, and secondly her overbearing father and pregnancy. Similarly, Beloved “returned” to 124 after her death as a tortured ghost and again in living form after Paul D cast her out. Her ghostly motivations in both instances could have been to haunt and disrupt, or to restore maternal connections between herself and Sethe. Regardless of her intent she and Pallas share the desire to inhabit feminized geographically isolated spaces. The remote location of both places is vital to their desire to separate themselves from the neighboring townspeople. The convent is similar to 124 Bluestone Road in *Beloved*, because it is a “...meeting place... [and] it is not separate from the surrounding community” (Anderson 311).

These scenarios are related to the often shared characteristics of the bondmother. Which I argue leads to their experiencing social exile, either forced or self-imposed. Beloved and Pallas both have left the havens of 124 and the Convent, respectively, but were forced to return. Although both instances appear voluntary the women’s re-joining of these isolated women-centered communities is a reflection of their inability to join the larger society. Anderson writes that the Convent women who might “...attempt to communicate with the outside world, ... are ignored or told to leave...they remain at the convent because have nowhere to go and no one to return to... they haunt the building, each wrapped in her own painful memories” (Anderson 314). This reading of the inhabitation of a space because of the lack of other options also applies to Beloved. Neither Pallas nor Beloved can leave the space because they cannot communicate with the outside world. After the massacre at the Convent, this changes for Pallas. While both women sought out the safety of their respective location and returned to it for that reason,

once there attempted exile occurred only one survived. When faced with another eviction from the reigning community, Beloved vanishes.

While Pallas resurfaces at her mother's house, a site of trauma, in order to reclaim her shoes. Pallas searched under her mother's bed for shoes, "... [she] didn't turn; she left through the sliding glass door...drove off into a violet so ultra it broke her heart" (Paradise 312). The shoes up until this point have been in her mother's possession and reflect the control her mother's behavior had over her destiny. These selfish behaviors contributed to her inability to forge normal social bonds, and her eventual time at the Covent. Being forced out of the one social environment in which she held agency did not lead to her hiding or ambiguous vanishing, she returned to the home of her maternal tormentor and reclaimed her freedom. Her shoes reflect her ability to choose when and where she goes. Pallas as an extended and transformed version of Beloved does not accept the eviction, and is allowed the freedom to make decisions about her whereabouts. Readers are informed upon leaving her mother's home she chose not to seek out isolation but instead to rejoin the women, they waited for her in the after her visit to her mother's. Pallas refuses to be pushed into obscurity by the townsmen or her mother.

Trauma

The decision to exclude oneself from the reach of those who sit outside the space that a bondmother has deemed safe is usually based on her having experienced an intense trauma. Although most of the women in *Paradise* and *Beloved* have experienced some sort of trauma for a bondmother it might negatively impacts her ability to form natural maternal bonds. Because she is inherently *supernatural*, no bond formed between Beloved and the child she was carrying could be wholly natural. Despite her bordering on

the cusp of spectrality and actuality Beloved was pregnant and her maternal bond was disrupted. The disruption she experienced was that of multiple rapes, either of which may have resulted in her pregnancy. Unlike Beloved, supernaturalism does not impede Pallas's ability to forge natural maternal bonds, they can exist until disrupted by others. Despite this difference, Pallas was also raped, and either attack could have resulted in her having become pregnant.

Prior to moving to moving into the convent for the first time, and away from her mother's home Pallas was being victimized by her high school janitor. In the text we learn that "Pallas Truelove elopes from school with the janitor, Carlos... Carlos and Pallas' mother ...are closer in age and become attracted to one another. Pallas who felt secure in Carlos' love and had given herself to him in complete abandon feels betrayed by both her lover and her mother..." (Das 173). Despite her consent Pallas is only sixteen years old and the fact that she and Carlos had to elope means that they did not have her father's consent. This relationship and any sexual activity that occurred can thereby be classified as statutory rape. Beloved's sexual relationship with Paul D although seemingly consensual has similar elements. Although Beloved was of consenting age her mental state was that of a child. Her cognitive development was stunted, presumably because of her infanticide leaving her unable to communicate or care for herself fully. This means that her sexual interaction with Paul D may have also been deemed inappropriate if not illegal.

Both characters also experience another sexual assault by strangers. Beloved struggles through a scene from her time on a slave ship where she says, "...he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there..." (*Beloved* 212). Pallas upon fleeing her mother

and Carlos "...is chased and raped by some hoodlums and then crashes into a lake" (Das 173). Morrison does not clearly note when either of the characters become pregnant or how far along they are. Readers only know that at the time of her banishment Beloved's belly was "big and tight" (*Beloved* 308). As for Pallas, we learn that she has given birth to a son during her second visit to the convent at the time Convent. Not only were the two molested, but they may also be pregnant with children of rape. This complicated beginning to a mother-child relationship may leave victims feeling, "... overwhelming psychological effects normally associated with traumatic experiences, including depression and suicidal behaviours, alienation, flashbacks, intrusive memories, disturbed sleep, withdrawal and avoidance..." (Liebling, Slegh, Ruratotoye 25). Although this is a fictional case Morrison typically allows her characters to reflect actual circumstances, so it is reasonable to assume that both had the potential to feel similarly about their children.

Beloved's inability to recount her attack is reflective of Pallas's inability. Upon her rescue by Billie Delia, Pallas is unable to reveal the details from her assault. Although she does assume that Pallas is pregnant, Billie foresees and imagines the fate of the women on more than one occasion. After the massacre she wondered, "When will they return...with blazing eyes...and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town" (Morrison 308). Billie's comment about Pallas's possible pregnancy can be read as another act of foreshadowing on Morrison's behalf. Anderson writes that the women from the Convent, "...have been weakened and silenced by the trauma they have experienced and are social ghosts" (314). Beloved has been weakened by seventeen years of supernatural and natural trauma. The evolution of this bondmother's

characteristic is that Pallas is allowed to recover from her traumas and escape a ghost like banishment.

Communal Healing

Pallas's recovery is disputed by Anderson who writes that Pallas, "does not achieve the same peace of mind" as the other women of the Covent. I would argue against this suggestion and cite her having received a communal healing from other like women as the evidence. Because she is the representation of Beloved as bondmother, their experiences do not fully mesh. For Beloved, peace and familial connection were denied to her. However Pallas's integration into the group of women into the Covent is what separates their experiences. Pallas, because of her having received healing direction from Connie was able to survive, heal, and grow.

In *Paradise* Morrison presents not only a mother-figure operating as human/bodied and fully alive she is afforded healing. In the Covent Connie offers nourishment first and then directed assistance. She tells the women, "If you have a place that you should be in and somebody who loves you...go. If not stay here and follow me" (Morrison 262). Connie then instructed the women on how to heal themselves, by having them lie down, draw, and even share their dreams aloud (Morrison 263). During one of their sessions Pallas shares her most intimate thoughts and feelings with the other women, who do not judge her. She dreams aloud using verbal communication to discuss her past trauma. With loud dreaming Pallas and the other women, "...not only unburden themselves of their traumatic pasts, but as each one talks, the other enters into her story, in full empathy with her in intuitive fellowship" (Page 642).

Beloved was unable to communicate in this way, which limited her healing options. She cannot speak coherently or share her feelings or fears effectively. She spends most of her time responding to that frustration by throwing things and attacking people. Pallas is allowed to draw and develop a visual representation of her experiences, called “templates”. Templates are the “...outlines of themselves that Connie makes the women draw on the basement floor—become self-representations through which they are able to get outside their self-destructing egos and see themselves, interpret themselves and thereby begin to cure themselves” (Das 169). This tactic may have been useful for an inarticulate Beloved but 124 was not a space for her healing it was only a dysfunctional rest stop.

Unlike Beloved’s time at 124, Palla’s time at the convent strengthened her. The women with Pallas were all focused on each other’s well-being reflecting a desire for communal healing versus a selfish one. In this way, bondmotherhood as embodied by Pallas, revealed its value for her and the potential it could have had for Beloved. Pallas was able to save both herself and her child because of her total restoration. This communal healing enabled her to protect herself from outside community members bent on destroying her.

Conclusion

This discussion of Pallas as an extension of Beloved as bondmother contributes to the well of knowledge on Toni Morrison and maternity. This existing literature deals with maternity in a way that often excludes the minor voices of her most popular works, *Beloved*, and *Paradise*. These authors, like Andrea O’Reilly, have developed insightful and thought-proving pieces of literature that ask readers to engage with Morrison in

groundbreaking ways. However, the framework in which her theories and others are grounded do not fully identify the experiences of enslaved mothers of Morrison's texts. My term, the bondmother seeks to fill that gap with a structured set of characteristics that link bondmother experiences. This linkage does not seek to limit the characters of Morrison's text in a way that does not allow for fluidity. In fact, the fluidity of the bondmother, because the bond is only limited by the scholar at work, opens the discussion of the oft-silenced voices and experiences of Black women and girls in literature and history in general.

Loucynda Jensen wrote that her work in the field of female resistance to slavery was spurred on because of the overwhelming masculinist approach to the field. Similarly, the treatment of Pallas and Beloved, as Black teen mothers, that have been mentally and physically abused are not afforded space to be examined in the field of maternity. Often times they are stereotyped and victimized, considered "two-dimensional cliches, thin and papery and disposable" by scholars and fellow characters alike (Kakutani para. 8). But it is my hope that the bondmother theory and its multiple reams of characterization, allow these characters to be examined for all that they offer the text and the genre of fiction.

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