“A Hot Thing”

Representations of Slavery, Identity, Naming and Mothering Violence in Selected Toni Morrison Texts

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Declaration

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Programme in English Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Samantha Schreiner, declare that

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To Toni Morrison

For the “drip and slide”, “cling and sway”, “clash and swirl” of your poetic writing and thought-provoking ideas. You are my best discovery.

Abstract

This dissertation explores themes of identity, naming, mothering violence and absent fathers in selected Toni Morrison texts. The novels under scrutiny are: *Beloved* (2011 [1987]), *A Mercy* (2009 [2008]) and *Sula* (1998 [1973]). My main – but not sole – focus is on the representation of women in line with Morrison's own privileging of women characters' perspectives. Therefore, with slavery as the umbrella of my analysis and her male characters being succinctly discussed, I analyse both the physical and mental ways in which these characters are enslaved, as well as the ways in which slavery was responsible for stripping down one's identity and how this has affected women as portrayed in the selected texts.

In order to adequately analyse these themes, I provide an extensive background to slavery, using intersectional lenses to discuss womanism, motherhood and fatherlessness. The notion that Black women suffer from a triple oppression, that being on the basis of race, sex and class, provides a compelling lens through which to study the portrayal of Morrison's violent mothers and matriarch figures. Through her abnormal representation of violent mothers and absent fathers, she breaks down idealised stereotypes. My central argument is that while this violence and absence results from years of identity dismemberment through slavery, it is also a result of men and women trying to re-establish power and authority as a means of survival in the face of racism and oppression. Slavery was responsible for the dismantling of Black identity, and with that dismantling other deterioration emerged within family and community units.

All three of the texts provide different aspects of identity, naming practices and issues of slavery to analyse. Naming, as an important aspect of identity, is investigated as it alludes to ownership. Morrison's characters are shown to be in a constant struggle not to be owned by anyone but themselves. *Beloved*, *A Mercy* and *Sula* offer disturbing tales of mothers who murder and abandon their children to ensure that they are not captured into a life of enslavement. Enslavement is represented variously across the three novels. These violent mothers' actions are extensively analysed as linked to a breakdown in identity that roots itself in a background of slavery. This violence, although disturbing and uncomfortable to the reader, can also be read as a form of protest against oppression and passivity from white patriarchy.

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Introduction

Toni Morrison has had an illustrious career. Born in 1931 as Chloe Anthony Wofford, she grew up in Ohio and graduated with a BA in English. Later, she went on to earn her Master of Arts from Cornell University and then began working as an editor in New York for Random House (Biography.com Editors, 2016:np). In the 1970s *The Bluest Eye, Sula* and *Song of Solomon* brought her national recognition and her writing career took flight. Morrison's novel *Beloved*, which became a critical success in 1987, was later made into a film starring Oprah Winfrey (Demme, 1998). After professorship and teaching English and creative writing at Texas Southern University, Howard University, Bard College, State University of New York, Rutgers University and Princeton University, she retired in 2006. Morrison has won the Pulitzer Prize for her novels, and she is the first African American woman to win a Nobel Prize in literature (Biography.com Editors, 2016:np).

Morrison's novels deal with weighty social topics including race, gender and slavery. While her writing is often disturbing, it evokes discussion and thought among all her readers. She was instrumental in bringing Black literature back into the mainstream and made a huge impression on the world through her writing. I personally find her a captivating individual whose thoughts carry extensive relevance in contemporary society. Through painting disturbing scenarios, she calls us to question various structures of power and "normality".

My title, "A Hot Thing", serves two purposes. The first is to create a sense of belonging to readers of Morrison's work as they would instantly recognise where that line derives from. In Chapter 22 of *Beloved*, we are given insight into the experience of death that Beloved endures. Throughout her monologue, she frequently ends her sentences with the phrase "a hot thing". This evocative phrase creates a sense of unity among individuals who have read the novel and apprehend immediately who said these words and the hidden meaning behind them. I feel that the phrase would create a kind of community.

The second purpose of my use of "a hot thing" is that it highlights the gender-conscious stance I take in my dissertation. One could read this as "a hot little thing" or "a sexy thing", both of which are subtle sexist remarks referring to women. However, my view is that this

"hot thing" is actually a hot *topic* and I trust that this dissertation will add to thoughts and ideas about Morrison's work and the issues of gender-consciousness.

This chapter begins by introducing the theoretical framework of my dissertation. I start by giving an historical background to the origins of slavery in America. I discuss how slavery results in broken identities and lost cultural heritage and how this affected family relationships. I then discuss identity and intersectionality and analyse how slaves were reshaped through naming practices, infantilisation and marginalisation based on race and gender. This leads to the theory of womanism, arguing that Black women face a triple oppression, seeking to gain authority in naming and defining self. Finally, motherhood is discussed as the stereotypical ideals of the gentle, nurturing and unconditionally loving mother are pitted against Morrison's violent mothers who kill their children. I then move on to discuss textual analysis as the research methodology of my dissertation. The third section of this chapter includes a literature review of the three novels under scrutiny and the final section provides an overview of the chapters to follow.

Throughout this dissertation, my central argument revolves around slavery as a multifaceted calamity and dismemberment of the identity of African American individuals, resulting in violent mothers and absent fathers as they come to terms with their name as "mother" or "father".

The three novels under scrutiny are *Beloved* (2011 [1987]), *A Mercy* (2009 [2008]) and *Sula* (1998 [1973]). The reason I have chosen these three novels is because the themes that will be analysed flow easily throughout, each portraying differing aspects and scenarios of the same ideas. Strikingly, the key theme of slavery is represented in a variety of aspects throughout the three novels.

Slavery

The theoretical framework of my research entails slavery, intersectionality, womanism and motherhood. Morrison's texts often centre on issues of slavery, with the goal of promoting egalitarianism which is negated by oppressive systems such as slavery and racism. Kenneth Stampp, in *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (1978 [1956]), expresses the following regarding slaves:

> The average bondsman, it would appear, lived more or less aimlessly in a bleak and narrow world. He lived in a world without schools, without books, without learned men; he knew less of the fine arts and of aesthetic values than he had known in Africa; and he found few ways to break the monotonous sameness of all his days. His world was the few square miles of earth surrounding his cabin [….] His world was full of mysteries which he could not solve, full of forces which he could not control. (1978:361)

In the above quotation, Stampp highlights issues of alienation, deprivation and powerlessness by illustrating the small space in which slaves had to live. The cultivation of powerlessness and alienation by slave-owners in their slaves over time created an absence of a secure and rooted identity. In order to analyse the theme of slavery, it is necessary to provide a background of key historical events. Peter Kolchin, in his *American Slavery: 1619 – 1877*, explains that America was heavily reliant upon coerced labour and that by the early eighteenth century slavery had become the dominant labour system of the Southern colonies (1993:3). Slavery grew slowly and steadily and was the product of European expansion. It was a system of labour designed to meet the labour shortage wherever landowners were trying to grow staple crops. The system of slavery brought about economic transformation for the "New World" or America (5). Colonial America experienced an abundance of land and a shortage of people to work this land, thus survival for colonial settlers depended upon agricultural work (6).

This coerced labour began with the use of First Nations Americans; however, colonists found that the First Nations men refused agricultural labour, something they believed was traditionally a woman's job. Furthermore, due to their familiarity with the terrain, First Nations Americans were able to escape their captors easily and did so frequently. Thus indentured servitude became the institution used to gain easy and cheap labour. This institution allowed for Europeans to enter America as temporary slaves in exchange for free transatlantic transportation (8). Indentured labourers arrived in America voluntarily, using servitude as a means of entering the country and obtaining a fresh start to their lives, or they were exiled and sentenced for criminal behaviour and thus were forced to flee to America. Servitude offered these individuals a chance to escape hardship, poverty, unemployment and prison, while it simultaneously offered colonial landowners a solution to their labour shortage (9). It has been observed by Kolchin that slavery, at its early beginnings, was largely colour-blind, meaning that it was not originally aimed at enslaving Black individuals. British mainland colonies consisted primarily of white individuals. As long as indentured servitude continued to exist, landowners were opting for indentured white English-speaking slaves

rather than importing African slaves. African labourers brought with them a multitude of difficulties for landowners. For example, landowners did not have the time nor did they care for the effort of trying to teach African slaves to speak English. Furthermore, due to the Portuguese and Dutch dominating the African slave trade, English colonists found slaves to be too expensive and difficult to obtain. This avenue was therefore largely avoided for an extended period of time (11).

A turn of events came about when, by the end of the seventeenth century, indentured Europeans experienced changing conditions in their homeland. In England, for example, as Kolchin explains:

> the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 was followed by political stabilisation and an economic upturn. Wages rose, employment opportunities improved [and] agricultural productivity increased. (12)

As a result of these changes, indentured servitude quickly began to deteriorate. Slavery became the most obvious way forward for landowners if they were to continue their farming productivity. They now turned their attention to Africa. At this period of time, African slaves suited landowners better because unlike indentured servants, slaves were permanent and women passed their status on to their children. Indentured servants were strictly temporary and were predominantly white, making it difficult to distinguish runaway servants from free men. Racial distinction consequently facilitated enslavement, according to Kolchin (13). It was certainly easier for free civilians to spot a Black individual and be able to imagine him suspicious if unaccompanied by a white owner.

While indentured slaves came to America mostly voluntarily, they could depart from their owner and plantation when their term was complete and build their own lives. African slaves, however, were forced into an iniquitous system that severed them from all family ties and their cultural heritage. They were snatched abruptly and without explanation from Africa, often encountering white people for the first time, who spoke a different language and had different cultural practices, and had to adjust quickly to this new lifestyle. According to James Morgan, in *Slavery in the United States: Four Views* (1985 [1933]), Africans were left in a problematic situation where they were not accepted as fully American and were also stuck, unable to travel on their own means back to Africa (1985:21). They were therefore a

rootless people, having lost their cultural heritage and excluded from the current culture they were thrust into. These circumstances resulted in a need for them to create their own culture.

What fuelled the mistreatment and enslavement of Africans was found extensively in the fears, prejudices and stereotypes the English had developed about Black people. Racism developed as follows, according to Kolchin:

> It is highly significant that the English saw Africans as black and themselves as white – in both cases inaccurately – for associated with the former term were numerous pejorative meanings ranging from dirty to immoral, whereas the latter carried equally positive connotations of purity, virtue, and godliness [….] [Black people] were "savage" or "uncivilised"; […] their culture was very different from that of Europeans and appeared to the English to be manifestly outlandish and inferior [….] They were "heathens", an attribute that may have been the most important of all, for in an era when being the wrong kind of Christian put one in mortal danger in most of Christendom, being a non-Christian automatically put one beyond the pale. (1993:15)

These ideas held by the British of that time played a part in shaping the negative stereotypes of Africans during the early years of slavery (15). One of the main, painfully racist, arguments pro-slavery groups maintained, contends that Black individuals represented a different species of human beings, and therefore "naturally" inferior and unsuited for freedom. Pro-slavery groups shockingly believed that Black people lacked the temperament and intellectual capacity for independent existence (193). Slavery, the British argued, provided a humane manner in which to create "conservative social order", although this opinion was based largely on the prejudices, fears and stereotypes that had developed regarding Black individuals (194).

According to Morgan, the British believed that the conversion of all non-Christians was their duty. Christians believed that all of mankind sprang from one blood; however, the blood of the Africans was "tainted with heathenism as evidenced in their skin colour" (1985:13). Other differences, such as language, government, morals, clothing and warfare, created criteria for determining human worth (14). Originally, however, according to Kenneth Stampp, many slave-owners were opposed to converting their slaves to Christianity in case baptism gave them "a claim to freedom" (1978:156).

Interestingly, slavery was also practised in Africa with wealthy Blacks as slave-owners in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Slaves serving in Africa worked as wives, concubines, household servants, agricultural labourers and victims of ritual sacrifice. They lived in the household of their owner and had the hope of eventually being "absorbed into the families and society of their masters" (Kolchin, 1993:20). However, slaves sold to America lost all possessions, their home, their loved ones, their language and their names. Slaves were subjected to tremendous distress as some of them had never before seen white men or the ocean. They were now suddenly encountering a multitude of new discoveries; terrified by their first meeting with white people who spoke a different language, they very often feared that they were going to be eaten (20).

Once in America, slaves were unjustly considered property that had to be "broken-in", that is, "made to accept their status" (57). Slaves often resisted the conditions they were forced to live and work under, ignored the Anglicised names they were assigned and frequently ran away. Stampp explains the process of "breaking in" a slave in five steps. The first step was to establish strict discipline that slaves were expected to obey at all times, under all circumstances. The second step was to implant a sense of inferiority within the slaves' minds; they had to personally feel and know the difference between themselves and their master, understanding that their skin colour had tainted them. The third step was to "awe them with a sense of their master's enormous power". This, also, was the instillation of fear. The fourth step was to convince the slave to show an interest in his master's enterprise and to accept his standards of conduct. And finally, the aim was to establish in slaves a habit of dependence upon their masters (1978:144-147). These deceiving steps, as directed by slave-owners, affirmed in slaves their status as property and resulted in them being bartered, pledged, seized, auctioned, and awarded as prizes in lotteries and raffles (201).

Horrifying punishment in the form of branding, nose slitting, amputation of ears, toes, fingers, and burning was frequently inflicted upon the disobedient slave. However, over the eighteenth century, a shift in the handling of slaves came about. It was now frowned upon to severely beat one's slave. Whippings became the preferred method of punishment, and fear was used to maintain oppression, although this was still not much of an advance on the former methods of punishment. To justify slavery and to control slaves, the racist and dehumanising ideas that Blacks were inferior, sub-human, stupid and possessing animal qualities became internalised by Black individuals (Morgan, 1985:28).

As both slaves and slave-owners became Americans (second-generation American-born) their relationship with one another began to change. Slave owners who watched their slaves being born, right through to becoming adults, conceived of "affectionate" feelings between slaves and their masters. Masters began to refer to their slaves as "their people" and some appeared to have developed a genuine love and care for them. Slave owners developed a paternalistic outlook (Kolchin, 1993:60).

Second-generation, and onward, masters saw themselves as patriarch figures who cared for their slaves, or, their "people". Paternalism involved slave-owners taking a personal interest in the lives of their slaves, interacting with them frequently and learning the names of their slaves (111). However, this new shift in attitude was not much of an improvement in the overall treatment of slaves. Slaves were prejudicially treated as children; ignorant and needing to be disciplined and taught about life. Kolchin explains the distorted close care and companionship of slave-owners as follows:

> Most owners had personal favourites among their slaves – a former playmate, a serving girl who grew up with (and shared secrets with) her mistress, a trusted assistant who helped run the plantation – in whose lives they took special interest. (117)

While masters developed a form of "love" for their slaves, they believed that their slaves returned the love. They found their slaves to be obedient and cheerful in their status as slave. However, according to Morgan, "what the average white person regarded as love was in actuality a type of fear" (1985:58). While Kolchin describes paternalism as affection between slaves and their masters that can be likened to a parent-child relationship, it is difficult to imagine this as a positive or helpful picture considering the fact that slaves were severely beaten, mistreated and dehumanised. Paternalism, implying that slave-owners were warm and loving fathers, offers no comfort to the violent history of slavery. Slave life was dominated by control in the form of rules and oppression. Slaves were told when to wake up in the morning, when to work, when to eat, when to rest and what to wear, and were prohibited from performing any kind of activity without the permission of their master beforehand. This represented the paternalism of the masters, treating slaves as permanent children who "needed constant direction as well as constant protection" (Kolchin, 1993:118). In Elkins's *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1968 [1959]), he describes the typical slave as

> docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggerations. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment: it was indeed a childlike quality that was the very key to his being. (1968:82)

These racist sentiments about Black slaves embodied a role slaves played as a defence mechanism in front of their masters, according to Stampp. He is of the opinion that it was these pretended qualities that led masters to believe that their Black slaves were stupid and childlike, needing to be constantly parented and guided. Stampp likewise describes the relationship between the master and slave as one of parent and child. He observes:

> The slave who had most completely lost his manhood, who had lost confidence in himself, who stood before his master with hat in hand, head slightly bent, was the one best suited to receive the favors and affection of a patriarch. The system was in its essence a process of infantilization – and the master used the most perfect products of the system to prove that Negroes were a childlike race, needing guidance and protection but inviting paternal love as well. (1978:327)

Additionally, this paternalism showed itself in the form of interference in the slave family. Interference kept slaves dependent upon their masters as, according to Kolchin, through years and years of abuse and instillation of fear, slaves were convinced that their master knew best in all aspects of life. Marriage between slave men and women was not legally binding, and legal authority over slave children lay not with their parents, but with their masters (1993:122). Kolchin asserts that the most dreaded form of interference in slave family life was the forced separation of family members. He explains it as follows:

> Children were taken from their parents and sent to serve in the "big house"; children and adults were hired out to employers who lived far enough away to make home visits difficult or impossible; slaves who belonged to wealthy masters were moved from one plantation to another, and those with owners in financial straits were "loaned" to creditors. (125)

A major reason for slaves being separated from their families came from their masters' death. This was a source of considerable anxiety for slaves as they awaited the fate that lay before them (126).

While slaves were looked upon by slave-owners as inferior to the white race, they were shaped into what the white man wanted to make of them. They were in a "school constantly training and controlling pupils who were in a backward state of civilisation" said Ulrich Phillips, an historian cited by Kolchin (134).

Interestingly, within slave families, matriarchy developed. This materialisation of matriarchy is highly relevant to Morrison's novels. Slave families were possibly less dominated by men because slave men lacked the legal authority over their wives that free men possessed. In a period when white women were considerably oppressed by white men, the opposite was found within Black slave family units. Slave wives held "equal or near equal status with their husbands" (Kolchin, 1993:140). Another reason that women headed households within slavery was due to the fact that men ran away, were sold off and hired out more often than women. Kolchin notes:

> For these reasons, mother-headed households, although not the norm, were relatively common; Malone found that about one-third of the nuclear households in Louisiana were headed by a single parent, in the vast majority of cases the mother. In short, slave women provided basic continuity to families – and communities – faced with disruption. (141)

While there are conflicting views about the dehumanising practice of using slaves as 'breeders', there is evidence that "breeding states" were Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, North Carolina and Kentucky while "buying states" were South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, Missouri, Florida and Texas. Breeding states had a more liberal attitude towards their slaves, while buying states were more hostile (Morgan, 1985:93). Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman wrote that a system for the breeding of slaves had to be implemented in order for masters to gain a considerable profit:

> [The 'breeding' of slaves occurred through] interference in the normal sexual habits of slaves to maximize female fertility through such devices as mating women with especially potent men, in much the same way as exists in the breeding of livestock [with] the raising of slaves as the main objective, in much the same way as cattle or horses are raised. (1974:78)

To encourage breeding, masters would reward female slaves if they produced the desired number of children. Furthermore, their workload would decrease while pregnant (Morgan, 1985:98). Despite these concessions, the demand for procreation is an exceedingly unsettling practice slave-owners imposed on their slaves.

As the slave population began to grow, African Americans knew very little about their ethnic roots and could not speak their native language (Kolchin, 1993:43). Naming practices began to change over time. Masters often assigned names to their slave children, consequently blotting out ethnic and traditional African names. Masters chose to mockingly name their slaves "Caesar", "Venus" or "Pompey" (45). Naming was a practice employed by slave-owners to establish new status and new identity for their slaves. The act of naming gave all authority and power to slave-owners while simultaneously stripping slaves of their dignity and right to name and shape their own world.

Naming practices employed by slaves were used to solidify family ties, thereby providing a way for families to reconnect with each other should they be separated, and later freed, at some point (46). Slaves would name their children after fathers and grandfathers, giving themselves surnames; however, they would not speak openly about their names around their masters. Masters very often did not even know about the oppositional naming practices adopted by their slaves (140).

Identity

The back and forth practice of naming that masters acquired over their slaves and slaves over themselves shows a deep seated pull for authority in the construction of identity. It is remarkably difficult for one to separate the study of identity from the institution of slavery. The institution of slavery held a critical influence in the breaking down of slave identity and in reshaping the way those slaves personally viewed themselves. Naming practices, matriarchal families, violent mothers and the culture of fatherlessness can all be linked back to the oppression endured under slavery that has so firmly intertwined with African American identity.

Identity is fashioned not only from one's physical attributes, such as gender and race, but also mental, emotional and spiritual attributes. Identity encompasses phenomena such as sexuality, a name, social class and background, as well as the concept developed about oneself over time. The aspects of identity that are most pertinent for my purposes are the act of naming, the manner in which characters identify themselves, the manner in which characters, in some instances, build their identity upon each other and the manner in which they take ownership of themselves. These aspects play a vital part in shaping and forming the grounds of and stability for identity.

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term "intersectionality" as an analytic tool in 1989 to address the marginalisation of Black women within not only antidiscrimination law but also in feminist and antiracist theory and politics (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays and Tomlinson, 2013:np). The term refers to the way in which different aspects of discrimination interact with each other. In her article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color" (1991), Crenshaw explains that social power works to exclude or marginalise based on those who are different with regard to race and gender. However, marginalisation based on one aspect, such as gender, is frequently intermeshed with a series of other identity dimensions such as race and class (8). Thus, intersectionality seeks to expose and discuss all dimensions of identity and how the social world is constructed on marginalisation.

Nira Yuval-Davis notes in her article, "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics", that in 2002, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights stipulated that they "recognized the importance of examining the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination, including their root causes from a gender perspective" (2006:193). Crenshaw uses imagery of an intersection and traffic in describing the situation women face in dealing with intersectionality:

> Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (1989:149)

The starting point of analysis of the intersectionality of various social divisions began with gender, race and class (Yuval-Davis, 2006:193). Gender, race and class represent the three most powerful organising principles in the development of cultural ideology. Each culture views these three principles in a different light, but the ultimate end-result is structured inequality (Belkhir and Barnett, 2001:157).

The notion that Black women suffer a "triple oppression" as Black, as women and as members of the working class is argued by Yuval-Davis, who observes that there is no such thing as suffering oppression "as Black", or "as a woman" or "as a member of the working

class". Rather, these social divisions hold within themselves a multitude of other, intermeshed social divisions, such as sexuality, age, gender, immigration status and nationality (2006:195). Yuval-Davis explains this complexity as follows:

> Any attempt to essentialize 'Blackness' or 'womanhood' or 'working classness' as specific forms of concrete oppression in additive ways inevitably conflates narratives of identity politics with descriptions of positionality as well as constructing identities within the terms of specific political projects. (195)

Social divisions exist in a number of ways, as Yuval-Davis explains. They are present in the way people experience inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage, specific aspirations and specific identities. These divisions affect how individuals view themselves and their communities, but also the prejudices people practise towards others (198). These differences are used for the construction of boundaries with regard to inclusion or exclusion of people and differentiating between self and Other. This differentiation leads to the belief that some are entitled to resources while others are not, thus resulting in hierarchies. Yuval-Davis puts it the following way:

> The interlinking grids of differential positionings in terms of class, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, ability, stage in the life cycle and other social divisions, tend to create, in specific historical situations, hierarchies of differential access to a variety of resources – economic, political and cultural. (199)

However, while these social divisions share a feature of being naturalised, they are not reducible to each other. For example, Yuval-Davis explains that to be Black is not another way of being working class, or even a particular type of working class person. She notes instead that people are scattered across different levels of power within different social divisions. This puts people into categories and stereotypes. For example, the majority of Black people in modern Western countries can be found in the lower socioeconomic classes (200). These social divisions prioritise different spheres of social relations to justify their enforcement. Class divisions are based on the grounds of economic production and consumption, gender divides individuals according to their sexual or biological differences and suggests that their social roles should be different, and ethnic or racial divisions are based on inclusionary or exclusionary boundaries that separate individuals into "us" and "them" (201). These divisions stem from historical belief or myth.

Although intersectionality addresses the concerns of different racial and ethnic groups, genders, sexual orientations, nationalities and disabilities, it appears to be moving towards engaging Black men. This is because of the notion that African American males are exceptionally burdened and marginalised, as noted by Carbado *et al*. in "Mapping the Movements of a Theory". This is an issue that is alluded to in the primary texts I have selected.

Womanism

As intersectionality examines the multiple layers of oppression that an individual might experience, womanism looks more specifically at the triple oppression Black women face, that being of race, gender and class. While feminism may reveal women's oppression by patriarchy, Black women have a variety of other forms of oppression on their hands.

I intend to employ the theory of womanism, a term coined independently by both Alice Walker and Chikwenye Ogunyemi. Walker defines a womanist in the following terms:

1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.
2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counter-balance of laughter) and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health [….]
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (Walker, 1983:45)

This concept developed from Black women feeling dissatisfied with the theory of feminism because they felt it protected and defended only white middle-class women. Womanism, however, arguably differs from feminism in that it does not view its male counterparts adversarially, but rather, recognises them as similarly oppressed.

One of the main elements that differentiate feminism from womanism is the way in which these two movements view motherhood. Some radical feminists, such as Adrienne Rich, view motherhood and childrearing as an oppressive institution used for patriarchal maintenance, while womanists view them as a site of empowerment. Patricia Hill Collins, in *Representations of Motherhood*, communicates the following:

> In the case of African-American women under slavery, owners controlled virtually all dimensions of their children's lives – they could be sold at will, whipped, even killed, all with no recourse by their mothers. In such a situation, simply keeping and rearing one's children becomes empowerment. (1994:66)

This is evident in *Beloved*, *A Mercy* and *Sula* as the represented mothers either emotionally distance themselves from their children so as not to become too attached, or they act out violently at any given chance in an attempt to mother their children. Violence and emotional detachment can be analysed as empowerment because they resist the oppressive power of slave-owners.

Clenora Hudson-Weems, in "Africana Womanism: The Flip Side of a Coin", claims that there is a difference between "womanism" and "Africana Womanism". "Africana" refers to materials such as books, literature and art relating to the history or culture of African peoples. Hudson-Weems explains that Africana womanism is grounded in African culture and therefore focuses on unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women:

> Africana womanism is family-centered, whereas feminism is female-centered. [An Africana womanist's] priorities are race, class and gender while the feminist concentrates on gender issues. [Africana womanists] strive for race empowerment; the feminist, no matter what form of feminism, strives for female empowerment. (2001:139)

Africana womanism seeks to gain authority in naming and defining the self. While womanism suggests that it caters to women in general, *Africana* womanism distinguishes itself by identifying with the ethnicity and cultural identity of the women being considered. Africana womanism is focused on race, class and gender rather than gender alone and strives for race empowerment rather than female empowerment (2001:138). While womanism shares these values, the focus is placed on women as a whole and does not clearly highlight its racial

difference. Both womanism and Africana womanism strive for the wholeness of entire people or the progression of culture through stability of family and commitment to community.

Hudson-Weems claims further that the recognition of the differences in the specific struggle for white women against male dominance and Black women in a concerted liberation struggle with their male counterparts becomes crucial for discussion (139). She cites Linda LaRue commenting that:

> Blacks are oppressed and that means unreasonably burdened, unjustly, severely, rigorously, cruelly and harshly fettered by white authority. White women, on the other hand, are only suppressed, and that means checked, restrained, excluded from conscious and overt activity. And this is a difference. (139)

It is also recognised that Black women share oppression more with Black men than with white *women*. This is due to their shared race and struggles therein rather than their gender.

Womanism appropriately calls us to look at the triple oppression Black women face, that being of race, class and gender; struggles that differ vastly from the struggles of white middle-class women. While intersectionality focuses its attention on how different aspects of discrimination interact with each other, womanism draws its attention to Black women in particular, not excluding their male counterparts.

Motherhood

Adding on to these representations of identity, in the second chapter of this dissertation, I will analyse the stereotypical ideals of women and the socially constructed feminine roles they are expected to conform to. This aspect of identity will fall under Morrison's portrayal of mother violence[1].

As mentioned earlier, feminism appears to cater mostly to white middle-class women, thereby failing to adequately cover the needs and struggles of Black women. My use of the theories of womanism and feminism throughout this dissertation serve as indicators or place-holder opinion. I use Rich as a radical viewpoint, understanding however, that there is no

[1] Throughout this dissertation I alternate between the term "mother violence" and "mothering violence". "Mother violence" refers to a violent act of a mother while "mothering violence" refers to an act of violence as a mothering tool used for discipline, teaching or protest.

absolute distinction between womanism and feminism because there are in fact a variety of schools of thought in feminist theory.

In Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan's *Representations of Motherhood*, white feminist women express the opinion that motherhood supports patriarchal maintenance. Motherhood is viewed largely as an institution rather than a liberating experience. The argument that women should be moving beyond and avoiding home and motherhood is emphasised. Child-rearing is seen as an instrument of oppression, and a call for the severance of the tie between women and motherhood is highlighted in radical feminism. The mother is represented as a victim, an unfree woman and a martyr (1994:6). Contrary to this view, Black women who embrace womanism depict motherhood in a completely different light. They view motherhood as the site of empowerment and self-fulfilment. While this view foregrounds the particular experiences of African American women, the idealised representation of motherhood is more positive than Morrison's portrayal of motherhood in her novels. This is because she is not bound by any of these theories. A dissonance emerges in Morrison's personal opinions about motherhood and her writing on the topic. She personally views motherhood as indeed liberating and an empowering experience, yet she writes about it in a seemingly negative manner. Morrison's novels refute any mechanistic application of feminist or womanist theories, instead requiring subtle and attentive analysis within the context of each novel.

The vision for the ideal mother is an all-giving, ever-present, self-sacrificing woman dominated by her children (1). Images of the maternal shape and are in turn reshaped by cultural practices (17). Morrison departs from this description in her writing almost entirely. Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986 [1976]), raises the issue of guilt that many mothers feel on some occasion for experiencing murderous anger, rage and hate towards their children (1986:24). Mothers are expected to be unconditionally loving at all times, yet thoughts of infanticide were becoming a revealed secret that many women were hiding[2]. However, the infanticide as portrayed by Morrison in her novels is not an expression of this same murderous rage or hatred directed at children, but rather a desperate act from Black women suffering different oppressions compared to those

[2] In Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986:24), she describes the story of a local woman decapitating her two youngest children on the front lawn. Discussion around this act led other women to speak openly about their sympathies and understanding of the woman's actions. It was discovered that thoughts of "murderous rage" and "wells of anger" towards children were in fact a common emotion but this was kept silent for fear of criticism because the institution of motherhood requires women to be unconditionally loving towards their children at all times.

experienced by white women. In Morrison's depiction of mothers, she unintentionally exposes the differences between white and Black women and mothers in their struggles and burdens. She provides evidence for the differences between a feminist and a womanist reading, while tending more towards womanism.

Morrison implicitly portrays her female characters as breeders whilst enslaved, not thoroughly occupying their role and full potential as mothers. Although her novels represent mostly matriarchs, they often depart from the socially constructed ideal picture that women are expected to fulfil. Once these women have been liberated and are free to remodel themselves from breeder to mother, we discover that they make drastic, often tragic, decisions when it comes to protecting and raising their children. The role of "mother" as part of a woman's identity is questioned significantly in *Beloved* and *Sula*. What we find instead of the nurturing and protecting mother is violence and detachment from her children. This would cause shock and discomfort to contemporary Western readers as their constructed ideals of woman as mother, nurturer and life-giver are reconfigured. However, again, not all feminists agree with the "motherhood averse" beliefs of Rich.

Modern Western society asserts that female self-fulfilment comes from motherhood. A naturalised ideal is taught that women hold within themselves an inherent maternal instinct and should therefore mother in order to lead fulfilling lives. Self-realisation and motherhood therefore go hand in hand for women. Adrienne Rich scathingly notes: "Institutionalised motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realisation, relation to others rather than creation of self" (1986:42). And resistance to this concept of women's destiny is seen clearly through the character Sula, when she explains to her grandmother that she does not want to make anybody else, she wants to make herself.

Morrison moves away from the notion of gentle, nurturing mother almost entirely. She depicts mothers as violent beings who, since they brought a life into the world, have the right therefore to take that life away. Her characters are strong, detached, violent women with mighty leadership qualities who raise daughters to be the same.

Morrison brings us to question what is natural. She brings into focus a "new order", a world where matriarchs lead single-parent households. She wants us to look at and meditate upon women and their situation in specific times, places and cultural settings. This picture, I feel,

represents a culture of fatherlessness. This links to womanism, where women are the ones in charge, striving for the survival of wholeness of all people. Morrison observes: "I don't think a female running a house is a problem, a broken family. It's perceived as one because of the notion that a head is a man" (Stockton, 2006:86). This explains why the majority of her novels have women in the foreground and men loosely entering and exiting the scene.

What is interesting to note is that most of Morrison's male characters are quite forgettable. They do not seem to display the same weight and gathering force that her female characters build up to. Her female characters are the ones that live on in our critical analysis, while her male characters are easily forgotten and take background positions. I believe this is a deliberate decision that Morrison makes in an attempt to show her readers the strength that many women carry in leading single-parent households, not just in fiction, but in reality too. The portrayal of women-led households is a realistic reflection of the family unit carried on from a broken foundation in slavery. As mentioned earlier, under the institution of slavery, marriage between slaves was not considered legally binding. This meant that slave-owners could sell, auction or dispose of their slaves without considering the married partner of that slave. A "family" under slavery was considered to be the woman and her children, excluding the father. The father or husband was very often looked upon as a helper to the female, a sexual partner with whom to grow the slave population and in essence, the possession of the *female* slave (Stampp, 1978:344). These women-led households are produced through the generations naturally as a result of previous oppression.

Methodology

The research method that I intend to adopt throughout my dissertation is based on Catherine Belsey's definition of textual analysis. Belsey describes textual analysis as a research method that involves a close encounter with the work itself. She suggests that one start from a problem in beginning the task of addressing a series of questions that may arise from the text (2005:173). Questions to consider in addressing a text involve asking where our sympathies lie, how we as readers are invited to view a particular character and to consider if there are any surprises in the text. Belsey makes reference to how Freud worked on the assumption that a "deeper or more subtle meaning was to be found in the unlikely places" (174). Once questions concerning the text have been formed, they begin to shape the beginnings of a hypothesis.

Belsey advises that one should "adopt a critical vocabulary which allows the text to 'invite' certain readings and 'offer' specific positions to its addressee" (167). This I do through my research of selected Morrison texts regarding slavery, mothering violence, fatherlessness and ideals of identity, particularly the act of naming. I analyse the aforementioned themes by looking at the characters Morrison portrays in the selected texts, how they interact with each other and how these various aspects of identity shape them.

Reading and grasping ideals portrayed through Morrison's female characters are further supported by secondary texts. However, Belsey cautions her readers that the key to saying something new lies in "never taking other people's word for it". Secondary material, Belsey explains, is there to provide well-informed, coherent and rhetorically persuasive arguments (164). She further postulates that:

> Research is expected to make a contribution to knowledge; it uncovers something new. Research is supposed to be "original" in the sense that it is independent: the contribution, whatever it is, originates […] with the researcher. It does not have to be "original" in the much more daunting sense that it springs fully armed from the head of the researcher without reference to any previous account [….] [T]he contribution can be quite small, a piece of the jigsaw. (163)

By Belsey affirming that there is no such thing as "pure" reading, I am encouraged to draw upon my repertoire of knowledge that consists of culture, personal interests and secondary sources. According to Belsey, while research entails unearthing information, it is the textual analysis that poses the questions which research sets out to answer (171). My intentions, therefore, are to assemble a constellation of ideas in a manner that has not been considered before.

As mentioned previously, Belsey urges readers to use secondary sources sparingly and rather to begin with a list of questions posed by the text and explore those, as opposed to following other analysts' interpretations. Dialogue can be found within a text which engages the reader in seeing and rethinking his/her positions (164). Belsey goes on to explain Barthes's ideas of unmasking the author in that "criticism allots itself the important task of discovering the Author beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is explained" (165). A text is composed of signifiers and therein lie the material for analysis. The text participates in the process of signification and iterates meanings which always come from the outside (167). Research involves tracing intertexts and reading them alternatively to establish the specificity

of the text in question (168). Thus, by using secondary sources, I intend to gain outside signification for each text that I will be researching.

Finally, Belsey states that textual analysis does not need to resolve a final truth: "no one true meaning can ever come to light [….] [T]he definitive truth is not available – now or at any time" (176). Meanings are always undecidable and therefore, I hope to add weight to intellectual thought on ideas of identity, the significance of a name and the notion of mothering violence through my dissertation.

Literature Review

Marianne Hirsch's "Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *Representations of Motherhood*, edited by Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan (1994 [1989]), shows a compelling perspective through which to examine *Beloved*. Hirsch advances the argument that in dealing with the issue of "rememory", it is neither memory nor forgetting, but memory combined with repetition that the text can be read. This "rememory" is Morrison's attempt at re-conceiving the memory of slavery, something that an entire culture has tried to repress (1994:96). *Beloved* furthermore is a story challenging maternal representations. As a slave mother, Sethe has a different relation to the concepts of selfhood, individuality and subjectivity (95).

In *Beloved*'s narrative representing motherhood, a constant push and pull of connection and separation is emphasised. Sethe is separated from her husband and her children when she sends them ahead of her. She is further separated from her own body under slavery as she is viewed as a breeder. The slave-owner has ownership over Sethe's body as property, allowing him to beat her physically, thereby marking her body as well as robbing her of her milk and children.

Trios and a merging of individuals are highlighted throughout the text. The name of the house, "124 Bluestone Road", suggests that the third child is missing, or perhaps represents mother and two daughters. There are three slave men all sharing a common name: Paul, distinguished only by the last letter of the name, A, D or F. When Mr Garner dies, a trio arrives to take over the plantation made up of Schoolteacher and his two nephews. This merging of individuals opens the door to study identity and the discovery of self.

Hirsch says that Sethe was a mother before she became a subject. She was only able to free herself, both physically and emotionally, after she was already a mother. Sethe's subjectivity is recognised by Hirsch as not born until the end of the novel (100). Sethe's body is viewed as marked by slavery, just as her mother's body was marked by a circle and cross under her breast. While Sethe's body is not marked as her mother's body is marked, she is essentially marked *by* her mother in that she carries her mother's history of infanticide, and ultimately repeats this course (102). The focus, then, in *Beloved*, is the representation of motherhood, the birthing process and the violence that these represented mothers exhibit. Sethe's body is not merely the vehicle of a birth into freedom: it must itself be (re)created and cared for in the transition between slavery and freedom (102).

Looking at the character of Beloved, it is evident that she complains more about the abandonment than the violence that was visited upon her (105). The "hot thing" that she is obsessed with possibly represents her mother's milk separated from her, with an additional association of hot blood. A combination of connection and separation is represented through the character of Beloved:

> Beloved's [rebirth] is a composite personal and cultural memory that boldly equates the womb with the tomb with the slaveship, the crouching in the Middle Passage with the fetal position, the sea with uterine fluid, milk and blood. (105)

In this, Beloved takes the shape and form of Sethe and others around her. Beloved *is* memory herself; the story of slavery and the memory of slavery returned to confront what the community has been trying to repress (105).

> Beloved comes forth to tell the story that Paul D. had locked up in a metal tin, the story that Sethe had never told Denver, the story of the past that Ella believed should not be allowed to take over the present, the story that Stamp believed he had already paid for. (107)

This memory of past trauma is exhibited through the intertwining of characters. As Hirsch describes it, Sethe and Beloved have the same face. Beloved and Amy, Amy Denver and Denver all have the same name. The Pauls share a name, and Baby Suggs's name can also be likened to the murdered nameless baby. Sethe is both mother and child, Beloved too is both mother and child, and this relationship goes back and forth between the two women as the novel progresses. *Beloved* is a story of motherhood, identity and memory; it involves rebuilding of a self, based on past destruction.

Developing identity shows itself in the form of binary oppositions in the "self" and "Other", a theme most prominent in *Sula*. The novel, as stated by Deborah McDowell in "The Self and Other: Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female text", offers a useful model of self, of identity and identification. A compelling observation made by McDowell is that bearing the title name, the narrative suggests that Sula is the protagonist, the privileged centre, but her presence is constantly deferred. This novel is a tale of a search for the self (1988:80). Sula is presented as a character associated with water or fluidity, constantly in the process of changing and forming. "Sula never achieves completeness of being", and her shifting of multiple selves can be found in her birthmark, constantly changing shape depending on the viewer's perspective (81). McDowell notes that Nel and Sula's lives complement and flow into each other. This occurrence can be likened to what takes place in *Beloved* among Beloved, Denver and Sethe as their identities too seem to shift and merge into one another at various points in the novel.

Nel and Sula possess within themselves oppositional elements to their appearance and desires that combine to make a new type of self. One is portrayed as "good" while the other is "bad". One is the colour of "wet sandpaper" while the other is "heavy brown". When it comes to sexuality, one is a sexually desiring *subject* while the other is the *object* of male desire. Sula's choice to explore sexuality frequently and freely means that she assumes responsibility for her own pleasure while Nel expresses sexuality only within the institutions that sanction it for women: within marriage and family (82).

Claude Pruitt, in "Circling Meaning in Toni Morrison's *Sula*", puts forth the idea that characters in *Sula* are grotesque embodiments. This applies not only to female, but notably, male characters. The men represented are economically, socially and politically powerless (2011:118). Likewise, the female characters are equally grotesque embodiments. This is seen through the recurring woman-centred families throughout the novel. A sense of absent fathers persists throughout not only *Sula* but *A Mercy* and *Beloved* too. *Sula* shows us fragmented women who seem to depart from common stereotypes of femininity as seen in the sexual casualness of Hannah and her daughter, Sula (118).

Barbara Johnson's "'Aesthetic' and 'Rapport' in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" (1998 [1993]) takes a Freudian approach to the novel and links to Pruitt's ideas of grotesque embodiments. Johnson suggests that violence can be likened to Freud's notion of the castration complex (78).

Throughout the three texts, we find fragmented body parts of the various female characters. Furthermore, the loss of bodily intactness is integral to survival, as seen by Sula slicing her finger and Eva amputating her leg (78).

Amanda Putnam's "Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Mothering Violence in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Beloved,* and *A Mercy*" highlights some key concepts that apply to my analysis of the texts. Violence is a prominent theme in Morrison's novels, and what is evident here is that most often, it is the female characters that hold the violent tendencies. Putnam explains that the act of Morrison's female characters' turning to physical and verbal violence is an attempt at redirecting the victimisation they so often endure, and thus resisting this oppressive power (2011:25). By projecting violence, these female characters present themselves as dominant figures in oppressive situations (26). Putnam notes:

> Most of Morrison's youthful characters learn about violence within a matrilineal home setting, when they are exposed to violence toward, and then from, their mothers and grandmothers. At times enslaved but always oppressed, these adult women characters are abused frequently by multiple sources: spouses, parents, employers, slave-owners, and community members. Consequently, the women's mistreatment is then redirected toward others – often children – within the family. (26)

This idea is commonly displayed throughout Morrison's texts. An example of this can be found in *Sula*. Eva, the matriarch of the Peace household, is a one-legged woman said to have cut her own leg off to obtain insurance money to support her family. This is the same woman who burns her son to death to put an end to his hopeless drug addiction and also the same woman who throws herself out of a window in order to save her burning daughter. Although we do not know Eva's background, we know that her children and grandchildren observe and learn from her violent actions. Sula grows up observing these acts and adopts self-harming demonstrations.

Florens, from *A Mercy*, likewise experiences violence in the form of rejection and abandonment from her mother. Although her mother's actions were pure in trying to provide a safer life for her young developing daughter, her lack of explanation causes Florens's emotional growth to be stunted. She does not learn to navigate relationships or learn to trust – and so the innocent and self-martyring act of rescue from the mother becomes also an act of violence, setting in motion her daughter's future brutality and ultimate self-destruction (33).

Sent away by both her mother and lover, Florens cannot make sense of the past to create a new life, even in freedom. Nonetheless, in this desperate act of violence, Florens rebels against the limitations of societal behaviour, taking action and refusing to accept abandonment yet again (33). Florens's mark of violence caused by her mother leads her to repeat the course by physically harming a small child she views as a threat.

Putnam remarks that Morrison establishes child murder as "the ultimate form of mother violence, exposing the complexities of the mothering construct in terms of creation and destruction" (27). Modern Western society has constructed mothers as nurturing, gentle beings, making it shocking to read Morrison's portrayal of mothers, going against these societal norms.

Beloved, *Sula* and *A Mercy* intertwine fluidly in their themes of violence and the building of identity or a "self".

Overview

My dissertation is divided into chapters according to theme, rather than being discussed novel by novel. This is because each text holds a multitude of themes that can be compared and contrasted with one another simultaneously. The juxtaposition of the three novels provides an interesting study. I analyse these themes by looking at the characters Morrison portrays in the selected texts, how they interact with each other and how these various aspects of identity shape them. It should be noted that the three novels are set in different time-periods relating to the history of slavery. *A Mercy* is set in the late seventeenth century, when slavery was relatively new to America. *Beloved* is set towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, nearing slavery's abolition. Finally, *Sula* ranges from 1919 to 1965. While *Sula* is not set in a time of slavery, Morrison's characters face a racial and social enslavement.

In this introductory chapter, I have covered the theoretical framework such as slavery, intersectionality, womanism and motherhood. Furthermore, the methodology, literature review and overview of my chapters were discussed in detail.

In chapter 1, I delve into the notion of identity, more specifically, gender, race and briefly, sexuality, from an intersectional perspective. By examining *Beloved*, *A Mercy* and *Sula*, I look at the effects slavery has on identity, focusing specifically on Morrison's women characters. I examine the significance and weight behind a name. *Beloved*, *A Mercy* and *Sula*

provide a compelling play on the use of names. Under slavery, slave-owners took the liberty to label their slaves humiliating and nonsensical names after planets or kings and queens. Slaves did not accept these names and would rename themselves and their children in private. Naming practices were used to ensure that, through the passing down of family names, slaves would be able to reunite should they be separated or freed in the future. I analyse the ways in which Morrison plays with the naming and misnaming of her characters.

In chapter 2, I look at the concept of mother violence. Investigating specific societies' imagined idea of "woman", I explore how Morrison breaks away from this picture using her female characters in *Beloved*, *A Mercy* and *Sula*. I scrutinise the idea that a significant role of woman is to become mother, and once reached, the breakdown of this picture from within different forms of slavery.

In chapter 3, I look at the concept of fatherlessness. Each of the three texts under scrutiny reveals an absence of strong and grounded men. The fathers of the children represented in each novel are absent and hold little weight in their upbringing or guidance. Most of the male characters drawn by Morrison exit as quickly as they enter and are easily forgotten.

In the concluding chapter, I discuss how slave narrative plays a role in the rewriting of a silenced history. I conclude by showing the manner in which slavery was responsible for the breakdown of identity and family structure, resulting in the absence of the idealised maternal figure and loss of fathers and husbands not only in Toni Morrison's novels but in contemporary Western society as well. Finally, I analyse the applicability of Morrison's slave narrative to a South African context.

Chapter 1

"Call me my name": Issues of Naming and Identity

"I don't want to make somebody else, I want to make myself." (Morrison, 1998:92)

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *A Mercy* and *Sula* provide a captivating analysis on the issues of identity and naming. Enslavement resulted in the severe dismantling of Black individuals' identity. Being brought from Africa and denied their right to exercise their cultural practices or speak in their native tongue, a new Black identity emerged. This chapter will navigate through a variety of aspects dealing with broken identity as a result of enslavement and the naming practices that Morrison chooses to adopt for her characters as a form of protest. The first subheading, entitled "Named, Misnamed, Renamed", deals with a background to slavery and the naming practices therein. I then analyse Morrison's use of over-naming and under-naming her characters. Her over-naming can be found in her decision to name buildings, plantations and houses before she chooses to name actual people. Her under-naming can be found in her choice to name groups of her characters the same name, rather than carefully crafting each of them with separate identities. The subheading "One and the Same – Self and Other" delves into the notion of merged identities. Morrison frequently makes use of trinities among characters that share similar traits. In *Beloved* for example, Sethe, Denver and Beloved form a trinity, as do the three Pauls, and the three Deweys from *Sula*. The notion of trinities and merged identity leads me to the subheading "Own Yourself", where I analyse the manner in which characters strive to take ownership of themselves and their identities, breaking away from labels and pressures placed upon them. Some characters reclaim their physical appearances and body parts that were once used and broken for slavery or ridiculed for "otherness". The focus on body parts and physical appearance leads me to the topic of "Body Image". Here, I analyse the slave body as shamed and broken, and the constantly changing or shape-shifting physical identity of characters. Finally, "Godlike Qualities" delves into the idea that specific characters place their identity and security in being owned by someone: a lover or master, anyone who can take the place of god or creator in their lives.

To name something is to declare authority and take ownership over it. The institution of slavery shows the constant push and pull for dominance and authority. Slaves were

disconnected from their families and unable to reconnect with one another once freed. Many Black individuals within the confines of slavery experienced serious identity dilemmas. Forced to live in a new land and culture that was not their own, and unable to take themselves back to their homeland, Blacks in America had to establish new identities in order to survive.

Masters took ownership of their slaves as property by dictating their everyday lives, interfering with their family relations and taking the liberty of imposing patronising and humiliating names on them, such as "Caesar", "Venus" or "Pompey" (Kolchin, 1993:45). Kenneth Stampp, in *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, notes that slaves were bartered, deeded, pledged, seized, auctioned and awarded as lottery and raffle prizes. He observes: "Men discussed the price of slaves with as much interest as the price of cotton or tobacco" (1978:201). This gives us insight into the disturbing inability of slave-owners to differentiate between commercial goods and human beings, and thus further exposes their lack of empathy. Slaves were forced to give up their heritage, forbidden to learn to read or write, and separated from their mothers, fathers, husbands, wives and siblings. James Morgan, in his *Slavery in the United States: Four Views*, notes the following:

> The […] Americanized African became a transplanted African, forced to give up his heritage and become homeless. Having no viable means of acquiring the power necessary to make him acceptable fully as American, the African and his descendents became an unwanted and despised people who could not go back to Africa nor be accepted as equal Americans. (1985:21)

As just noted, the suppression of Black African culture and heritage was further maintained through regulations prohibiting slaves from learning to read and write, meet together in groups, travel without permission, beat drums, blow horns or own guns (Stampp, 1978:208). These rules and regulations would undoubtedly have caused issues around identity loss.

Right from the beginning of *Sula* we are made aware of Shadrack's positioning as a twenty-two-year-old Black man returning from World War I. He is despairing because of his predicament:

> weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn't even know who or what he was … with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no

> soap, no key, no tobacco pouch, no soiled underwear and nothing nothing nothing to do. (1998:12)

While this description of Shadrack depicts a man confronted by the effects of shell-shock, the passage does provide an observation into identity. Men experiencing shell-shock were perceived as feminine, unable to endure the supposed masculine work of war. Shadrack appears to represent a character who is able to cross gender stereotypes and demonstrate sensitivity. His fluid sense of identity and lack of roots sets the tone for the novel to follow. Even the small possessions that fill our daily lives, Shadrack does not have. He has no pencil, no can opener, not even a pair of soiled underwear belonging to him. This rootless and weightless representation of identity is perhaps an illustration of the struggles that African Americans after the abolition of slavery, and even up until contemporary society, have been engaged in as a result of a history of slavery and dismantled identity. Stampp explains how slaves were stripped of their identity and treated as property in the following way:

> Legally a bondsman was unable to acquire title to property by purchase, gift, or devise; he could not be a party to a contract. No promise of freedom, oral or written, was legally binding upon his master [….] In court he was not a competent witness, except in a case involving another slave. He had no civil rights, no political rights, no claim to his time, no freedom of movement. (Stampp, 1978:197)

Family units are viewed as responsible for the shaping of personality and culture in a young child's early life. As the institution of slavery strove to divide and destroy family units, Black identity became "surrendered" to white masters. Slaves became a displaced people whose very name identified them as property (Morgan, 1985:127). Morgan powerfully describes the breakdown of slave identity:

> The loss of cultural forms and the forced adoption of new cultural traits forced slaves to become […] clay in the pottering hands of whites. The destruction of the family unit brought about such a psychological trauma that family roles were reversed. The female became more pronounced, having all of what little authority was allotted to the family. This situation also created a double role for the female slave. She became a sex object for the white male and a "mammy" for white children. (144)

This inability to claim identity, along with the failure to put roots into a land and culture, created a sense of powerlessness within Black Americans. Morgan effectively articulates that "the Negro's powerlessness lies in their inability to name their own world" (139)

Throughout the texts under scrutiny, Morrison illustrates the weight behind a name. According to Scott Remer, knowing someone's name can be considered an intimate expression (sine datum:7). This is seen in *Beloved*. Beloved approaches Paul D and asks him to touch her on the inside part and call her her name, as though the two acts are equally intimate (7). Similarly, Sethe is hesitant to give her real name to Amy Denver and instead calls herself "Lu". Baby Suggs stops herself from hearing the white slave-owner from saying her children's names because then, to her, they cannot be dead, and Sethe's mother drowns her babies without remorse because they are without names. Similar portrayals of intimacy in knowing a name are seen in *A Mercy*. Lina drowns Sorrow's new-born baby before it is given a name, and Sorrow finds personal strength in renaming herself. Likewise, Nel and Sula strip away the different roles placed on them by naming themselves "me" and "mine".

Morrison shows, through her writing, how naming is manipulated by various figures of authority. Naming, according to Remer, is used by whites to belittle slaves (s.d.:3). This is apparent in the various names that are evident in *Beloved*. Sixo is given a number for a name and, like the Deweys named by Eva in *Sula*, Paul D, Paul F and Paul A are given "serialized names completely devoid of originality and individuality" (3). Sethe is a woman named after a man – her father. Both Sethe (*Beloved*) and Florens (*A Mercy*) do not know the names of their mothers but refer to them as "Ma'am" and "Minha Mãe". Denver is named after the white woman, Amy Denver, who saved both Sethe's and Denver's lives along their passage to freedom.

One of my main areas of interest in dealing with the topic of identity is the way in which women are treated. As previously mentioned, "intersectionality" is a term introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw as an analytic tool to address the marginalisation of Black women within not only antidiscrimination law but also in feminist and antiracist theory and politics (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays and Tomlinson, 2013:np). Gender, race and class represent the three most powerful organising principles in the development of cultural ideology. Social divisions exist in a number of ways, as Yuval-Davis explains. They are present in the way people experience inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage, specific aspirations and specific identities. These divisions affect not only how individuals view

themselves and their communities, but also the prejudices practised towards them (Yuval-Davis, 2006:198). Differences among varying categories of people are used for the construction of boundaries with regard to inclusion or exclusion of people and differentiating between self and Other. This differentiation leads to the belief that some are entitled to resources while others are not, thus resulting in hierarchies.

Discrimination against Black women on grounds of their race, sex and class, as well as the enforcement of hierarchy, is most evident in *Sula*. The character Sula is told frequently that because she is Black and a woman, she has no freedom or independence. Nel and Sula's friendship is founded on the discovery that "they were neither white nor male, and that all the freedom and triumph was forbidden to them" (Morrison, 1998:52). At a later stage in the novel, Nel tells Sula that she cannot "do it all" because she is "a woman and coloured" (142). Nel goes on to say that Sula cannot go about acting like a man, and by that she means, being independent. Black female citizens of the Bottom have been forced into particular categories that maintain their lack of influence. Sula, however, is a woman who defies these beliefs and lives according to what suits her. Barbara Christian, in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, describes intersectionality in the following way:

> The struggle for black women […] to define themselves rather than [be] defined […] is critical to the struggle of white women, of all American women. As poor, woman, and black, the Afro-American woman had to generate her own definition in order to survive, for she found that she was forced to deny essential aspects of herself to fit the definition of others. If defined as black, her woman nature was often denied; if defined as woman, her blackness was often ignored; if defined as working class, her gender and race were muted. (1989:161)

While African American identity loss has its roots in the institution of slavery, Black women in particular are found to carry a more complicated burden. Morrison makes a play on names and identity throughout her novels. She illustrates the frailty and importance of identity through scenes of slavery and discrimination. Naming practices form the grounds on which identity is established. Names help to shape and define our world in such a way that to be called "woman", "black" and "slave" all form different aspects of identity that her characters must learn to carry.

Named, Misnamed, Renamed

Naming holds a remarkable influence in the rooting of an individual's identity. Thomas Hobbes observes that a name anchors a person's character and reputation, and also grounds

that person in a community's memory (1996 [1651]:np). Yvette Christiansë, in *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics*, asserts that a name is a form of address in which to root oneself, and that to lose a name is to become indistinguishable from one's environment (2013:48). Thus, slaves used naming practices to solidify family ties threatened with rupture by naming children after fathers and grandfathers, particularly boys, because males were frequently sold (Kolchin, 1993:140).

Throughout the three texts, we find a curious and unique play on names that Morrison applies; she both under-names and over-names her characters. Under-naming can be found in her choice to name whole groups of her characters with the same name rather than choosing to name each one individually. Her over-naming is evident in the naming of houses and land *before* the naming of people. Elizabeth Hayes, in "The Named and the Nameless: Morrison's 124 and Naylor's 'the Other Place' as Semiotic Chorae", explains that to name is also to claim dominion: naming children, slaves, domestic animals, or real estate is an announcement of figurative, if not literal, ownership of the named, as well as an indication of the namer's relationship to or sentiments about the named (2004:669). This is an idea that forms a common thread throughout the texts.

The act of renaming oneself to take back power and authority is illustrated in Sorrow (*A Mercy*), and Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs (*Beloved*). Christiansë remarks that the origins of the character names are almost always explained, as though reminding the reader of the violent past of slaves (2013:25). Sorrow, from *A Mercy*, is perhaps one of the most interesting characters to analyse in terms of naming. A chapter is dedicated to Sorrow; how she came to be on the plantation with the Vaarks and how she acquired her name. It is apparent from an initial glance that her name is well suited to her. The occurrences and tragedies that have taken place in her life, and the injustices of actions perpetrated against her, have caused her to be named "Sorrow". However, she is not sorrow personified and in this regard, she has been misnamed.

When Sorrow is rescued from a shipwreck, at first glance her rescuers assume that she is a boy, and this builds into the breakdown of identity that Sorrow experiences on land. She has no history and knows nothing about her history. She is unsure of the events that occurred and chooses not to disclose her real name. She is assigned a new name and can be easily renamed when sold. When the sawyer asks Sir to take Sorrow, he is told: "Don't mind her name, you can name her anything you want" (Morrison, 2009:118). This illustrates to the reader that

slaves are property, treated as pets that can be passed around and renamed over and over again without any inconvenience. The housewife takes ownership over Sorrow by naming her, and later this power is given to Sir. At no point does anyone consider what Sorrow would like to be called.

When Sorrow takes the opportunity to name herself at the end of Chapter 8, we are surprised by her sudden voice and claim to personal authority. She stands her ground, and this occurs on the basis of motherhood. The first time that Sorrow is pregnant, she herself is merely a child, and Lina quickly kills the baby before it is given a name. When Sorrow is pregnant and gives birth for the second time, she does this alone and rises to the occasion of motherhood. This is something that she is eager to experience. Through her child's birth, Sorrow too is reborn and decides to rename herself "Complete". Sorrow renames herself because of the potential that is within her, trusting that what she calls herself will eventually materialise.

Stamp Paid, originally named "Joshua", likewise renames himself. His renaming comes when he hands over his wife to his master's son. If we consider the name Joshua for a moment, we find that it holds significance in itself. Joshua, from the Bible, was called by God to succeed Moses and lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. This name is surprisingly fitting for Stamp Paid as he, in a sense, led slaves out of "Egypt" (Sweet Home) into "the Promised Land" (freedom). He is instrumental in helping runaway slaves escape; he has an entire system in place providing runaways with food and transport. "Stamp Paid" seems to be an absurd name; however, it announces his rejection of white ownership and oppression.

Most captivating is the discovery of how Baby Suggs arrives at her name. Baby Suggs asks Mr Garner why everyone on the plantation always calls her "Jenny", to which he replies: "'Cause that what's on your sales ticket, gal. Ain't that your name?" (Morrison, 2011:167). Even calling Baby Suggs "gal" diminishes her identity. It makes her small, a child, not looked upon as an elderly woman with years of wisdom, opinion and skills. "Jenny", too, was not her name and had never been her name. Mr Garner presses on:

> [Garner:] "What did you answer to?" [Baby Suggs:] "Anything, but Suggs is what my husband name." [Garner:] "[…] Why you call him Suggs, then? His bill of sales says Whitlow too, just like yours." [Baby Suggs:] "Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny." [Garner:] "What he call you?" [Baby Suggs:] "Baby." [Garner:] "Well, […] if I was you I'd stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs Baby Suggs ain't no name for a freed Negro." (167)

On the Sweet Home Plantation, Garner holds authority to name and shape the world for himself and his slaves. He is surprised to learn that Baby Suggs would like to go by another name, and is equally surprised to discover that she was married. Even though Baby Suggs is a freed woman, Garner tries to maintain authority by rejecting both of these aspects of Baby Suggs's identity. Regardless of whether "Baby Suggs" is a name for a freed Negro or not, this is the name she chooses and keeps for the rest of her life. Remer says that Baby Suggs uses her basic human right to assert her newfound independence and heal from slavery's scars (s.d.:1). This name is interesting because, while Baby Suggs is trying to piece together her identity and re-establish herself as a free woman, her first move is towards naming herself. Her original, yet false, name as "Jenny Whitlow" gives the reader insight into her identity having been stripped from her and renamed under slavery. She rejects this name because no one but white people ever called her this.

When Garner asks her what she calls herself, her response is that she does not call herself anything. Remer suggests that this is a divorce from the self that has been enforced through oppression and an empty language (s.d.:4); the term "empty language" is used here because slaves were denied the chance to shape their own world through language and excluded from the culture into which they were thrust. Baby Suggs looks to her husband as a stable factor in her identity, and decides that she will go by the identity given her by him and continue her familial ties with him. She will be "Suggs" simply because that is who he is, and "Baby" because that is what he calls her. The name "Baby" holds a great deal of intimacy and comfort for her, unlike the impersonal name "Jenny". Interestingly, just as Baby Suggs is infantilised through Mr Garner calling her "gal", she chooses to name herself "Baby". When "Baby" is used as a term of endearment by romantic partners the connotations are no longer those of infantilisation, but rather, a deep affection and care for that person. "Baby Suggs was all she had left of the 'husband' she claimed" (Morrison, 2011:168). Thus in divorcing herself from the infantilisating name "gal" placed on her by Mr Garner, she takes the name "Baby" which reveals a tenderness and a drive to rooting her identity in someone she trusts fully and is therefore not an infantilising name to go by.

With all the examples of renaming and misnaming, there are also examples of characters that Morrison chooses not to name at all. Beloved is the only one of Sethe's four children whose name we do not know. When referenced in the novel, she is the "crawling already?" girl. "Dearly Beloved" was all Sethe could afford to have carved onto her tombstone. Hayes notes

that even that is not truly a name, it simply describes the feelings Sethe has for her deceased daughter, and also represents the only two words Sethe hears at the funeral: "Dearly Beloved" (Hayes, 2004:675). Beloved's name can be analysed in detail. The term "Dearly Beloved" is found frequently throughout both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The fact that it is a term used in Christian wedding and funeral ceremonies implies its endearment and intimacy. The term "dear" can represent cost and emotional warmth and connection. However, as with Morrison's use of the term, if the "dearly" is omitted, the word "beloved" on its own becomes somewhat ominous. The omission of the word "dearly" can be paralleled with the omission of the number three or, third child, in 124 Bluestone Road, further representing the extensive damage and loss of a dear and loved child.

When Sethe, Denver and Paul D arrive home one evening, they discover a young woman sitting outside their house waiting for them. The woman explains that she has no last name; she goes by the name "Beloved". It is noteworthy that Morrison takes care to name entities, before choosing to name people (675). Beloved is not named in the novel yet the plantation, "Sweet Home", and the house, "124 Bluestone", are named and have personalities. Although everyone knows that she is called "Beloved", no one actually knows her name (Morrison, 2011:322). She becomes something "disremembered, unaccounted for", someone that cannot be lost because no one was looking for her, "and even if they were [looking for her], how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed" (322). The constant struggle throughout the novel is to figure out who she really is. She does not appear to respond even to the name "Beloved", and thus remains nameless.

124 Bluestone is a house with a name. This is unusual because houses are not generally given names. The house seems to be a character of its own as it has feelings and moods. 124 Bluestone is at times loud, and at others, quiet. It is full of rage, fury, grief and venom. It acts out in spite and outrage, it screams and is sometimes sad. Denver recognises the house as alive; a person rather than a structure, "a person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits" (35). When Stamp Paid walks past the house one day, he hears it speaking:

> The speech wasn't nonsensical exactly, nor was it tongues. But something was wrong with the order of the words and he couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life. All he could make out was the word mine. (202)

It is this house that appears to represent the "crawling already?" girl since she was not named at all. She is the third of Sethe's children born to her, the only one she manages to kill, which makes the house number "124" interesting. The number three is missing; similarly, the third child of Sethe is missing from the family. Child number three makes herself known through the character of the house. It is important to draw attention to the use of the word "mine" in the above quotation. Throughout *Beloved* Sethe, Denver and Beloved engage in metaphorical and emotional struggle in claiming ownership of themselves and each other. This is as a result of a history of enslavement and the loss of identity and self[3].

Sweet Home is another example of a house with a name. The plantation, as remarked by Paul D, "wasn't sweet and it sure wasn't home" (16). Morrison makes use of naming to show the mishandling of different entities. Houses, like 124 Bluestone Road and Sweet Home, are given names and more character than the unnamed "crawling already?" girl. Remer effectively expresses the following regarding naming:

> The misnaming of Sweet Home, a place which is representative of slavery as a whole, demonstrates how the corruption of whites' moral and ethical codes has contaminated language itself; whites seek any outlet to assuage their bloodstained consciences, contorting language and names themselves in a futile attempt to legitimize slavery and convince themselves that slavery is justified. (s.d.:1)

Sweet Home is an ironic name for a slave plantation. This is because the white owners of the plantation viewed it as just that: a sweet home. It was a beautiful, inspiring place to be and home to its white owners. Sethe recalls a time when "the only way she could feel at home at Sweet Home was if she picked some pretty growing thing and took it with her" (Morrison, 2011:27). And so she begins to pick flowers and put them in the main house where she works to create some comfort for herself. Originally, the plantation was a comfortable place for the slaves but still not considered their "home". Male slaves were regarded as men by Mr Garner, trusted to carry guns, allowed to talk, to marry and so forth. Upon his death and the entrance of Schoolteacher, Mr Garner's brother, the plantation is no longer "sweet" but a place of abuse and torture.

[3] The significance of the use of the word "mine" is relevant to *Sula* as well. Although not set in a time period of slavery, Morrison depicts Nel and Sula as finding personal freedom in owning themselves rather than belonging to anyone else. The characters are constantly working to formulate their own identity apart from others. Ownership of self is closely linked to freedom and will be discussed in depth at a later stage of this chapter.

Perhaps the starkest example of misnaming can be found in the naming of "the Bottom" in *Sula*. Cynthia Davis remarks that all of Morrison's characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it. The constant censorship of and intrusion on black life from the surrounding society is emphasised, she declares, by a constant pattern of misnaming. Power for Morrison is largely the power to name, to define reality and perception (1982:323). Davis reveals that the reason for Morrison's misnaming lies in the idea that a whole group of people have been denied the right to create a recognisable public self (327). Ironically, this neighbourhood stands in the hills, above the valley town of Medallion, and its name came about as a "nigger joke":

> A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy – the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, "Oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile." (Morrison, 1998:5)

The master goes on to explain that the hills are referred to as the Bottom because when God looks down, the hills are the bottom that he is looking at. The slave eagerly accepts the deal and finds later that planting is backbreaking; the soil slides down and the seeds wash away. The white master is able to define the Black slave's world easily through the use of naming, or rather, misnaming.

Occasionally, Morrison points out the elusiveness of identity in characters, particularly through the use of naming. For example, in *Sula*, we follow the story of Sula's transforming and deepening relationship with Ajax. Sula discovers Ajax's driver's licence and reads through the details:

> Born 1901, height 5'11, weight 152 lbs., eyes brown, hair black, color black. Oh yes, skin black. Very black [….] But what was this? Albert Jacks? His name was Albert Jacks? A. Jacks. She had thought it was Ajax. All those years. (135)

Sula goes through the aspects of his identity that make him up, but discovers that his name, perhaps the most crucial part of his identity, was not what she had always believed it was. This depicts the elusive identity of many Black characters and their struggle to be known.

The significance of discovering that Ajax is in fact Albert Jacks, takes him from a strong and heroic character to a meek and average man. His new name, his real name, makes him foreign and unknown to the reader as well as to Sula. It makes him easy to miss and forget about, since we never really knew his name.

Morrison shows the shape-shifting identity of her characters in their rootlessness likewise through Shadrack's opinion of Sula. The influence she has on him is revealed through his point of view:

> It was pleasant living with that sign of a visitor, his only one. And after a while he was able to connect the belt with the face, the tadpole-over-the-eye-face that he sometimes saw up in the Bottom. His visitor, his company, his guest, his social life, his woman, his daughter, his friend – they all hung there on a nail near his bed. (157)

Sula's identity in Shadrack's eyes takes on many different roles. She is daughter, friend, woman, guest, all in one, and at the same time, none of these things when viewed by others in the very same community. Shadrack has the capacity to see Sula differently because of his experience with shell-shock. This "feminises" him, making him able to relate in sensitivity to Sula.

In *Beloved* and *Sula*, Morrison makes use of a theme of trinities. On the Sweet Home Plantation, three men are given the name Paul and are distinguished only by the last letter of their name: A, D or F. Their identities seem to be serialised and uncharacteristic. We cannot tell them apart by appearance because this is not given to us. We simply accept the three Pauls with their common name. In *Sula*, Eva is a matriarch who uses her authority to name various individuals. She frequently takes the liberty to name the guests boarding in her household. An interesting play on names is illustrated to us when Eva names three separate young boys "Dewey":

> They came with woollen caps and names given to them by their mothers, or grandmothers, or somebody's best friend. Eva snatched the caps off their heads and ignored their names. She looked at the first child closely, his wrists, the shape of his head and the temperament that showed in his eyes and said, "Well. Look at this Dewey." When later that same year she sent for a child […] across the street, she said the same thing [….] When the third one was brought and Eva said "Dewey" again, everybody thought that she had simply run out of names [….] (37)

The opening of this paragraph indicates that the boys already had names given to them by their "mothers, grandmothers or somebody's best friend". This shows a sense of rootedness and a *desire* to be rooted, in individual and community identity.

Hannah asks her mother how they will tell the children apart, to which Eva responds that they do not need to be told apart, because they are all deweys. Although each of these boys is remarkably different in appearance and age, one with deep black skin and golden eyes, another with light skin, freckles and red hair and still another, half Mexican with chocolate skin, they somehow become difficult to distinguish. They become a "trinity with a plural name" (Morrison, 1998:38). This merging of identity among the boys causes confusion for their teacher:

> She too thought that she would have no problem distinguishing among them, because they looked nothing alike, but like everyone else before her, she gradually found that she could not tell one from the other. The deweys would not allow it. They got all mixed up in her head, and finally she could not literally believe her eyes. They spoke with one voice, thought with one mind, and maintained an annoying privacy. (39)

This merging of identity is evident likewise in *Beloved*. Denver, Amy Denver and Beloved all share a name. Although they are distinctly different in appearance and we are aware of their differences, their names link to a common identity. Denver is named after the white woman, Amy Denver, who helps Sethe give birth. Amy and Beloved share a name in that the name "Amy" means "Beloved". The various trinities that form among characters can be viewed as a merging of identity and the inability to decipher between the self and Other.

One and the Same – Self and Other

Throughout *Sula*, we learn that the friendship between Nel and Sula causes them to become interchangeable with each other. They seem to be two halves that complement each other wholly. When the friendship between the two girls begins, we learn very quickly about how their opposites bring relief to each other:

> [Sula] seemed to have none of her mother's slackness. Nel, who regarded the oppressive neatness of her home with dread, felt comfortable in it with Sula, who loved it and would sit on the red-velvet sofa for ten to twenty minutes at a time. [… Nel] preferred Sula's woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother,

> Hannah, never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink. (29)

The contradiction of chaos and order between the two girls is what draws them in to each other and creates a self and Other. They come from opposite backgrounds; one has a mother who is uptight and orderly, while the other's mother is relaxed and messy. Their friendship is described as having developed because they find in each other's eyes the intimacy they are looking for. Nel takes on a leadership role in her friendship with Sula; however, this role shifts back and forth between the two girls throughout the novel.

Nel and Sula's friendship is so intimate that they begin to have difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's. The novel expresses their "oneness" in the following passage referring to Sula's return to the Bottom:

> It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed. Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle and a little raunchy. Sula, whose past she had lived through and with whom the present was a constant sharing of perceptions. Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself. (95)

The closeness they share is equivalent to being "one and the same" and "having a conversation with herself". Over time, their identities become merged with each other and even Eva cannot tell them apart. When Nel discovers Jude and Sula naked together in the bedroom, it is Jude whose nakedness makes Nel feel uncomfortable. In fact, Nel remarks that Sula does not look naked to her at all. When Jude gets dressed and forgets to do up his fly this bothers Nel terribly. She feels ashamed and distressed by his nakedness and wants to hide it for him, but Sula, she observes, "sits on the bed not even bothering to put on her clothes because actually she didn't need to because somehow she didn't look naked […], only [Jude] did" (106). For Nel, this perception of nakedness exposes her weak relationship with Jude in comparison to her rich and deep friendship with Sula.

When Nel visits Eva, years after Sula's death, Nel leaves quickly in discomfort:

> [Eva:] "Tell me how you killed that little boy." [Nel:] "What? What little boy?" [Eva:] "The one you threw in the water [….] How did you get him to go in the water?" [Nel:] "I didn't

> throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula." [Eva:] "You. Sula. What's the difference? […] Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you." (168)

In this moment, Nel mourns the loss of her friendship with Sula as a loss of part of her own identity. The two of them are so closely connected that to the community, there never was a "difference between [them]". Their identities have been so merged together that the loss of Sula when she sleeps with Jude is what rocks her more than losing her husband. Morrison highlights through the novel the intimacy and closeness that women share with each other through friendship.

Sula is shown as breaking away from the idea that she and Nel are "one and the same" and begins to view their relationship as "self" and "other". This realisation makes Sula a strong and secure woman who can stand alone confidently. Sula's confidence in who she is is described in the following way:

> Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life. […] [T]here was no other that you could count on, [and] there was no self to count on either. […] She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property, or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments – no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself – be consistent with herself. (118)

Sula "makes herself". She is totally secure and confident in herself and does not strive to satisfy others. Sula and Nel are not the only ones, however, to place their identity in each other.

In *Beloved*, Denver begins to place her identity in Beloved, while at the same time, Beloved builds *her* identity into Sethe. This results in the merging of identities among the three women, and as mentioned earlier, a trinity is formed. Along this growing need for Beloved to take more and more of Sethe's energies, time and affection, we discover the gathering identity Denver builds into Beloved. Denver recalls the day Beloved appeared sitting outside their house:

> Denver stayed in her emerald closet as long as she could, lonely as a mountain and almost as big, thinking everybody had somebody but her; thinking even a ghost's company was denied her. So when she saw the black dress with two unlaced shoes beneath it she trembled with secret thanks. Whatever her power and however she used it, Beloved was hers. (Morrison, 2011:123)

Everything that Denver missed out on resulting from isolation in 124 Bluestone Road is rediscovered in Beloved:

> She had not been in the tree room once since Beloved sat on their stump after the carnival [….] Nothing was out there that this sister-girl did not provide in abundance: a racing heart, dreaminess, society, danger, beauty. (90)

Her identity becomes so wrapped up in Beloved that when Beloved disappears briefly, Denver unravels:

> This is worse than when Paul D came to 124 and she cried helplessly into the stove. This is worse. Then it was for herself. Now she was crying because she has no self [….] She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing. She grabs her hair at her temples to get enough to uproot it and halt the melting for a while. (145)

Denver becomes undone when she fears she has lost Beloved. Beloved is her "thickness" and her "self". Denver's thickness of self can be paralleled to Sethe's thick love for her children, even the identity and pride that she places in them. For Denver, without Beloved, she loses a huge part of her identity. This unravelling of identity and body is seen likewise in Beloved when she imagines not having Sethe all to herself. When Beloved pulls a tooth out of her mouth she visualises progressive bodily disintegration:

> This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. (157)

Similarly to Denver's dependent thinking, Beloved views Sethe as the glue that holds her together. Without Sethe, Beloved believes that she will lose herself; she will fall apart into many pieces.

The dependence Denver feels towards Beloved is mirrored in Beloved's dependence on Sethe, and later still, Sethe's dependence on Beloved. A most curious merging of identity begins to form. They become a trinity, excluding anyone outside from interfering. Chapter 20 opens with Sethe saying, "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine" (236). Here starts the ownership and building of identity in another. Sethe overcompensates: "because you mine […] I have to show you these things, and teach you what a mother should" (237). Sethe begins to take ownership over Beloved as her daughter. Denver does the same, as she too feels that Beloved is "hers".

Sethe says in joyful disbelief at the close of the chapter that "she came back to me, my daughter, and she is mine". Chapter 21, Denver's voice, opens with: "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (242). This gives Denver a sense of entitlement to Beloved. She is part of both mother and sister, through milk and blood. The imagery portrayed here can also resemble the Holy Sacrament of Christ's body broken and sacrificed for sinners. Beloved is sacrificed, although not initially intended for sacrifice. When she is killed, Schoolteacher no longer wants to take Sethe or her children. He regards Sethe as too wild and counts her as a loss. In this scene, Schoolteacher removes Sethe's identity even further by seeing her as nothing, not even someone to enslave. This is all as a result of Beloved's death. Beloved lays her life down, is sacrificed, washes her family in her blood and thus saves them all from a future of enslavement. Denver has taken her life source and sustenance from her mother's breastmilk, and likewise, the life source of her sister. Denver closes her monologue with the lines: "She's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (247). The following chapter opens with Beloved speaking: "I am Beloved and she is mine" (248). Beloved is referring to Sethe. When Beloved speaks, her focus is fully on Sethe:

> She took my face away […] It belongs to me she is the laugh I am the laughter I see her face which is mine it is the face that was going to smile at me in the place where we crouched now she is going to her face comes through the water a hot thing her face is mine (251)

Here, Beloved starts to merge her identity with Sethe. They become one and the same, and others begin to have trouble telling them apart. Beloved asserts: "now I am her face my own face has left me" (252). Beloved, Sethe and Denver are so intrinsically connected to each

other through blood and milk, a Holy Sacrament, that they cannot tell themselves apart from one another.

Chapter 23 displays a merging of voices. Beloved speaks to both Sethe and Denver, and the reader has difficulty distinguishing who is being spoken to. Starting with Beloved speaking to Sethe, the conversation then becomes aimed at Denver. The closing lines of this excerpt become a trinity, a merging of the three voices that can be seen as alluding to the Biblical poetic book, Song of Songs:

> Beloved
> You are my sister
> You are my daughter
> You are my face; you are me
> I have found you again; you have come back to me
> You are my Beloved
> You are mine
> You are mine
> You are mine (255)

And finally on the last page of the chapter:

> You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?
> I will never leave you again
> Don't ever leave me again
> You will never leave me again
> You went in the water
> I drank your blood
> I brought your milk
> You forgot to smile
> I loved you
> You hurt me
> You came back to me
> You left me (256)

The voice in this paragraph depicts the speaker as one person rather than three different women taking turns to speak.

By now we are starting to see that Beloved belongs to everyone. She begins to take on a multitude of identities: she is daughter, sister, mine and ours. So who is Beloved really? Who does she represent? Marianne Hirsch suggests that Beloved represents memory itself, she is the story of slavery that is made tangible when she arrived at 124 Bluestone Road, forcing Sethe to confront her violent past (1994:105). Hirsch says that slave mothers neither "owned" themselves nor their children. *Beloved* is not only about a child's longing for a lost maternal object but about the immense loss experienced by a mother who is unable to keep her children alive or rear them (97).

The merged identity or trinity, among Sethe, Denver and Beloved, comes to an end when Denver notices the oppressive nature of Beloved in sapping Sethe's energies:

> [T]he two of them cut Denver out of the games. The cooking games, the sewing games, the hair and dressing-up games. Games her mother loved so well she took to going to work later and later each day until the predictable happened: Sawyer told her not to come back. And instead of looking for another job, Sethe played all the harder with Beloved, who never got enough of anything: lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk. (Morrison, 2011:282)

Over time, Beloved begins to occupy Sethe's identity:

> Dressed in Sethe's dresses […] she imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down to the walk, the way Sethe moved her hands, sighed through her nose, held her head [...] [I]t was difficult for Denver to tell who was who. (283)

When Beloved is finally exorcised from 124 Bluestone Road, Sethe is left feeling as though she has lost a part of herself. She tells Paul D "she was my best thing". Paul D responds "you your best thing, Sethe. You are" (322). He tries to get Sethe to realise that her identity does not lie in another person, nor does it lie in a tragic and violent past. Restoration comes when Sethe considers herself for a moment as her best thing. Almost in disbelief, or perhaps the sudden realisation of the truth, she replies "Me? Me?" as she begins to own herself.

"Own Yourself"

In *Sula,* issues of identity are explored through physical appearance, as well as the ability to own oneself. Reference to Nel's broad, flat nose is made on a number of occasions, as well as her mother's attempts to change its shape by pinching it for extended periods of time. A most

defining moment for Nel is when she looks at her face in the mirror and declares that she is "me":

> There was her face, plain brown eyes, three braids and the nose her mother hated. She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her. "I'm me," she whispered. "Me." […] "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me." (Morrison, 1998:28)

This shows us Nel's desire to strip away the weight of different identities placed on her; being a daughter, being Nel and having a nose her mother hated. All of these aspects add to her identity and she sheds them. While Nel's mother "drives her imagination underground" with her strong personality, Nel develops into a strong character of her own after her newfound "me-ness".

Like Nel's claim to being "me", Sula's entrance into Medallion after ten years of being away displays a strong character and a rooted identity. As already mentioned, Eva asks Sula why she does not get married. Sula explains that she does not want to marry and have babies because she does not want to "make anybody else, she wants to make herself" (92). Standing her ground, she claims that whatever she does and feels is hers:

> [Eva:] "Hellfire don't need lighting and it's already burning in you…" [Sula:] "Whatever's burning in me is mine!" [Eva:] "Amen!" […] [Sula:] "You sold your life for twenty-three dollars a month." [Eva:] "You throwed yours away." [Sula:] "It's mine to throw." (93)

Sula claims ownership of her life as "mine" just as Nel claims ownership of herself as "me". Towards the end of the novel, when Sula is on her deathbed, she and Nel have a conversation where Sula once again claims ownership of herself:

> [Sula:] "I sure did live in this world." [Nel:] "Really? What have you got to show for it?" [Sula:] "Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me." [Nel:] "Lonely, ain't it?" [Sula:] "Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you." (143)

Sula prides herself on her ability to own herself. "Owning oneself" through the perspective of *Beloved* portrays a different struggle, with slavery limiting the characters' autonomy. Within the institution of slavery, slaves were looked at as parts, and not a whole human being, their bodies fragmented. For Baby Suggs, slave life had "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands,

kidneys, womb and tongue" (Morrison, 2011:102). This fragmented or broken body chimes again with the broken body of Christ that was sacrificed for the salvation of humanity. Baby Suggs urges the Black community to love themselves. This can be viewed as taking ownership of themselves and their bodies, and rooting their identities. Baby Suggs expresses this powerfully:

> "In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them [….] This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms [….]" (103)

This claiming of oneself is seen too when Baby Suggs experiences freedom for the first time:

> But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, "These hands belong to me. These my hands." Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. (166)

The focus on the experience of body parts as slaves struggle to take ownership of themselves is frequently revealed by Morrison. Throughout the three novels, attention is paid to body parts as making up a character's identity. These fragmented parts are often revealed in the context of someone gazing upon a character as a voyeur.

"Your Body is Wild": Body Image

Constant reference is made to skin colour, wanting to change physical appearance, and the shape of one's nose as specifically seen in *Sula*. "Defined as the Other, made to be looked at, [Morrison's Black women characters] can never satisfy the gaze of society" (Davis, 1982:329). Sula and Nel seem to be perfect opposites that bring relief to each other:

> Nel was the colour of wet sandpaper – just dark enough to escape the blows of the pitch-black truebloods and the contempt of old women who worried about such things as bad blood mixtures [….] Had she been any lighter-skinned she would have needed either her mother's protection on the way to school or a streak of mean to defend herself. Sula was a heavy brown

> with large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose. (Morrison, 1998:52)

This description of skin colour, birthmark and eyes adds to Sula's identity. And, like Nel's broad flat nose, Sula's birthmark over her eye is a similar feature that is watched, referenced and observed throughout her life. When Sula returns to Medallion after ten years, Nel's children refer to Sula's birthmark as a "scary black thing over her eye". Later, Jude sees Sula's birthmark as a copperhead. Still later, it changes to a rattlesnake. Shadrack's perspective is that the birthmark is in the shape of a tadpole. This implies a metamorphosis of some kind. Shadrack sees Sula as a transforming young woman, one who is totally different from everyone else in the community. Shadrack's view of Sula as a young woman in metamorphosis is evident in the many things she resembles to him: friend, daughter, sister and visitor. When the community believes that Sula is evil, her birthmark then is neither rose nor rattlesnake, but now a mark from Hannah's ashes.

A Mercy shows Florens's shift in body image along her journey to the Blacksmith. While Florens views the Blacksmith as godlike in appearance and social position, her own body is viewed as demonic and evil. Widow Ealing shelters Florens for the night, and it is here that Florens encounters racism and a breakdown in her identity. A group of radical Christians approach the house to discuss Daughter Jane, a young girl whose eyes are crossed, making the community believe that she is a demon. However, when they encounter Florens instead, the response is negative and attention is moved from Daughter Jane to Florens, a black girl. The scene is one of heightened hysteria and panic:

> [The little girl] screams and hides behind the skirts of one of the women. Each visitor turns to look at me. The women gasp. The man's walking stick clatters to the floor [….] One of the women covers her eyes saying God help us [….] One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black. I have says another, this one is as black as others I have seen. She is Afric. Afric and much more, says another [….] The Black Man is among us. This is his minion. (Morrison, 2009:109)

Such a response stems from the ignorance of a people who have never encountered a different race and who hold their own as superior. This ties into the issue of self and Other, where white is self and Black is Other. The ignorance and hysteria driven by the white radical Christians cause them to treat Florens as though she is a demon sent by Satan. They point her to a room and order her to strip:

> Without touching they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue. They frown at the candle burn on my palm […] they look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. (111)

The eyes that examine Florens's body are searching to discover if her navel is in the correct position, if her knees bend backwards like the "forelegs of a dog", if her tongue is split like a snake's and if her teeth are pointed to eat them (113). This experience shocks Florens. She says that she can feel "something precious leaving her". Having confiscated the letter Mistress sent with Florens, she notes her vulnerability:

> With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without a shell, a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy. (113)

Florens's identity and safety rest in her Mistress's word. Florens is unable to vouch for herself when facing white people because she is property with no real identity. However, the novel being written in Florens's voice shows her as undertaking to speak for herself (Christiansë, 2013:61). When this letter is questioned, Florens's identity is shaken because her physical appearance has caused shock and discomfort to white people who have not been exposed to her race before. Her body and appearance, once celebrated by the Blacksmith, are now questionable. She wonders if her mother saw the same things in her as these people did, questioning: "is this what my mother knew about me? Not the outside dark we share, but the inside one we don't" (Morrison, 2009:113). Florens takes on the idea that she has a new identity, that there is darkness inside of her and that this is the reason her mother "expelled" her. Florens is no longer afraid on her journey to find the Blacksmith. She says: "The sun's going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home" (113). This new "dark" identity is embraced by Florens. She recognises a "feathered, toothy" being inside of her, and it is this feathered being that eventually attacks the Blacksmith with a hammer.

When Florens reaches the Blacksmith and displays violence against Malaik, Florens reads the Blacksmith's response to her violence as a rejection of her physical appearance:

> I am here with you always. Never never without you. Here I am not the one to throw out. No one steals my warmth and shoes because I am small. No one handles my backside [….] No

> one screams at the sight of me. No one watches my body for how it is unseemly. With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me. (135)

She feels safe in the thought of being owned by the Blacksmith, but after her violent display, he demands that she leave his house. In Florens's mind, this confirms that he is rejecting her identity and the darkness that has just been discovered in her.

But is this identity true of Florens? I do not believe so. This is a young woman who we know thrives off words of affirmation. Rebekka, the Mistress, is "amused by Florens' eagerness for approval". Words carry weight for Florens; "'well done', 'it's fine', however slight, any kindness shown her she munched like a rabbit" (94). The opposite would therefore have a negative effect on her. She takes the negative words spoken over her by the radical Christians and makes them her truth. Her identity is not one of darkness, nor is it a feathered, toothy being, but due to the suggested remarks made over her, she accepts it as true and adds it to her understanding of her mother's rejection of her. This now becomes Florens's identity. She is not a girl with thick skin; words have a deep and lasting effect on her. In this way, words become god, dictating the direction of her life.

Godlike Qualities

Throughout the three novels, masters, friends, slaves and lovers take the position of god. This depicts a people at search for someone to master over them as they struggle to root their identity in their own lives.

A Mercy frequently references spirituality and religion. God, Christianity, any form of religion, is rejected forcefully by Rebekka Vaark or "Mistress". The position of God is instead given to individuals surrounding the characters in their time of desperation. These characters appear to frame their identities around their peers, giving them authority as god.

Perhaps the most interesting character to observe in terms of unstable identity is Florens. Her misunderstanding of her mother's actions in sending her away with Jacob Vaark leads her to become a young woman desperate to be owned. Being born into slavery, separated from her mother and knowing no other life, she places her identity in her title as slave and desires that she be owned by a master, whatever form that may take. Initially, she desires her owners to be the Vaarks. When Mistress becomes ill, Florens is sent to find and bring the Blacksmith, a free Black man who is educated in medicine, to Mistress's aid. Florens says that for her

Mistress "it is to save her life. For me it is to have one" (35). If Mistress dies, Florens is unsure of what may befall her. Lina too sees the need to be owned. The distress resulting from Mistress's fate is highlighted in the following overview:

> three unmastered women and an infant out here alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile. (56)

These women recognise that their identity and worth largely lie in the mastering of their lives by another. They recognise security in belonging to someone. Someone needs to rule over them in order for them to have a place in the world. This is true for the slaves on the Sweet Home plantation from *Beloved*, as they likewise place their identity and survival in the hands of their master, just as Florens and Lina do:

> Nobody counted on Garner dying. Nobody thought he could. How 'bout that? Everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces. Now ain't that slavery or what is? (Morrison, 2011:259)

One person's life at the mercy of the life of another person depicts an intense dependence. It is exactly when Garner dies and Schoolteacher takes over that the slaves on the plantation, once relatively comfortable, lose their lives.

Lina places her identity in belonging to the Vaark family; however, this is unstable and fades away quickly. She initially "relishes her place in this small, tight family", but subsequently sees it as folly (Morrison, 2009:56). She learns that because the Vaarks lived their lives without producing any heirs, all their work comes to nothing in the end. As a First Nation American, Lina holds closely the need for a clan, something the Vaarks think unnecessary:

> Baptists, Presbyterians, tribe, army, family, some encircling outside thing was needed. Pride, she thought. Pride alone made them think that they needed only themselves, could shape life that way, like Adam and Eve, like gods from nowhere beholden to nothing except their own creations. (56)

Morrison's writing exposes how slavery strips individuals of their identity by refusing them the right to build close knit families or be part of a clan, tribe or any type of group. Slaves are a people divided and isolated, depending wholeheartedly on the lives of their masters.

Interestingly, in *A Mercy*, it is not only the slaves who view their masters as god. Occasionally this role is reversed. In her illness, Mistress has flashbacks to moments where Lina protected and saved their lives. She contemplates whether Lina is in fact god. Mistress's desire for security and protection lies in her slave, Lina, whom she views as omniscient. Lina attempts to place herself within a clan as a way of rooting herself in a culture and heritage. Because she does not have any immediate family, she tries to associate herself with the Vaark family, but shows her individuality by merging the different cultures she has learned over the years to find a way to be in the world. Lina establishes a syncretic identity:

> [S]he decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. (46)

Although Mistress depends on Lina, her life is ultimately in the hands of Florens, the seemingly insecure and fragile slave-girl.

Florens roots her identity in the Blacksmith, whom she falls in love (or lust) with. Without blatantly announcing her desire that he own her, her thoughts slowly reveal the identity she is framing around him. Unfortunately, Florens, desperate for attention and affirmation, takes more from the Blacksmith than she is given. While he is interested in her, his feelings do not hold the same intensity or life-altering value as Florens's feelings. Lina tries to caution Florens against the hope that she is building on the Blacksmith by saying: "you are one leaf on his tree". But Florens responds: "No. I am his tree" (59). The problem with Florens is that she establishes her identity in the Blacksmith, thinking that his identity is likewise in her. The Blacksmith is a strong and secure man, a free man, who is not in any way placing his life's hope in Florens being his beginning and end.

Along Florens's journey to find the Blacksmith, we quickly discover that he is an all-consuming entity in Florens's mind. He is the answer to everything she needs and wherever he is, is where she needs to be. She places him in the position of god:

> I think you are [strong and beautiful]. No holy spirits are my need. No communion or prayer. You are my protection. Only you. You can be it because you say you are a free man from New Amsterdam and always are that. (67)

Without truly understanding what it means to be free, she admires this quality of the Blacksmith and decides that this alone makes him powerful and godlike. Florens says: "You are my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose" (69). Along her journey to reach him, her thoughts become more and more outrageous and unstable in the authority she gives him over her life. This is why her encounter with the Blacksmith is a deeply disappointing one for Florens.

When Malaik is left in Florens's care, she responds violently to the child's needs. Malaik triggers a painful memory that Florens has of her mother abandoning her. Florens believed that her mother chose her baby brother over her and her identity is shaped by this abandonment. The Blacksmith returns home to the violent scene and in this moment he realises that Florens's identity rests in her status as slave. She is a slave both to love and man. She is a woman who cannot and does not own herself. She does not know how to own herself. This leads to a heart-breaking conversation between her and the Blacksmith:

> [Florens:] "I am a slave because Sir trades for me." [Blacksmith:] "No. You have become one [….] Your head is empty and your body is wild." [Florens:] "I am adoring you." [Blacksmith:] "And a slave to that too." [Florens:] "You alone own me." [Blacksmith:] "Own yourself, woman [….] You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind." (139)

The Blacksmith consumes her entire world while she has little significance in *his* world. Positioning him as god in her life allows him the agency to destroy her hopes and desires without his fully realising it. This conversation and the violent turn of events lead Florens to discover who she is on her walk back to her Mistress, her home. She reflects on the recent occurrence and boldly states:

> My way is clear after losing you who I am thinking always as my life and my security from harm, from any who look closely at me only to throw me away. From all those who believe they have claim and rule over me. I am nothing to you. You say I am wilderness. I am. Is that a tremble on your mouth, in your eye? Are you afraid? You should be. (155)

From her negative experience with the Blacksmith and Malaik, Florens quickly decides who she is. It is no longer the timid waif of a little girl, but rather a strong, dangerous and fierce woman who has now decided that she is her own person. Her new powerful voice is heard when she advances: "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (159).

In conclusion, this chapter has focussed on Morrison's portrayal of a rootless and weightless people. Through the three texts, she illustrates the struggles of the African American community battling a history of enslavement and a dismantled identity. This chapter analysed the power and intimacy of naming as a means by which to shape one's world and anchor into a community. Morrison depicts the Black community as surrendered to and oppressed by the white community, who have power to shape and control the world that they live in. They are isolated from this community and rejected on the grounds of race and physical attributes. Morrison further depicts, particularly through her female characters, the manner in which they seek to claim empowerment through the act of renaming themselves and searching for identity in each other. The merging of identity between characters, particularly mothers and their children, leads me to the next chapter which focuses on motherhood and the concept of mother violence.

Chapter 2

Mothering Violence

> I don't think a female running a house is a problem, a broken family. It's perceived as one because of the notion that a head is a man. (Morrison, 2006:86)

Throughout the texts under scrutiny, Morrison has illustrated through her characters the dismantling of the family unit as a result of slavery. This chapter will look at the stereotypical definitions of what a "good" mother is composed of and how Morrison departs from this stereotypical image almost entirely. Morrison's mother characters are represented as violent women who slit their children's throats, burn them to death and emotionally abandon them. I am interested in analysing these acts as deep mothering love. I start this chapter by looking at slaves as breeders. There, I analyse the historical background of slave women being treated as breeders, expected to grow a slave population. These "breeding" practices cultivated a sense of detachment between mothers and their children which later manifests itself in various forms of brutality. "Mothering Violence (Mothers)" analyses the uncomfortable display of murderous mothers and the reasoning behind the aforementioned acts that can be observed as a form of resistance against an oppressive culture. I then explore the effects of mother violence on children, particularly daughters. "Mark the Mark on Me Too (Daughters)" analyses the portrayal of daughters following in their mothers' violent footsteps. These young girls grow up inflicting harm on themselves and others as a coping mechanism against the daily oppressions that they face. "Daughter, Mother, Mine: Interchangeable Roles" looks at the cycle of daughters mothering their mothers. This corresponds with the dismantling of the family unit within slavery and a breakdown in identity. Finally, "Nobody had Her Milk but Me" analyses the womb and breasts as symbols of maternal instinct. Here, mothers are shown to be desperate to sustain their children, yet are robbed of their breastmilk and often have to "othermother" before their own children are considered. This desire to nurture pitted against violence acted upon their children makes for an interesting analysis.

In January 1856, according to Casey Nichols, Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave from Kentucky, made the decision to slit her two-year old daughter's throat. Garner and her husband tried to flee Kentucky with their four children to Ohio, a free state, before making

their way further to Canada, their final destination. They took refuge at Margaret's relative's house, but they were caught up with and apprehended by their slave-owner from Kentucky. Margaret, not wanting to be returned to slavery, tried to kill her four children and herself; however, only her two-year-old daughter was killed in the incident, leaving her other children and herself wounded. The family was taken into custody and imprisoned.

Margaret was hoping to be tried on charges of murder in a free state which would mean that she and her children would be considered free individuals. Unfortunately it was decided that the case was to be looked at as a fugitive slave case, viewing her and her family entirely as property. The family was returned to slavery by steamboat when a collision with another steamboat occurred. Margaret and her infant daughter were thrown overboard upon impact. Although Margaret was saved, the child drowned. Margaret later commented that she was happy her child had drowned; it was better for the child, in her opinion, to be put out of the world than to live in slavery (Nichols, 2015:np).

In Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, she takes a radical feminist approach to ideas of motherhood and infanticide. Rich describes a local case of a mother of eight, suffering from severe depression, decapitating her two youngest children on the front lawn. Rich, along with other women, sympathise with this mother as one who had been forced into the institution of motherhood and left to raise and care for eight children with an emotionally absent husband and father. Rich explains that the several women she interacted with were able to relate to the act of this mother, having experienced within themselves at some point in their lives, "wells of anger" or "moments of murderous anger" aimed at their own children (1986:24).

Rich holds the opinion that although women have been pushed into the institution of motherhood they have simultaneously been burdened with expectations of what it means to *be* a mother. She recognises that no human being is capable of feeling the emotion of love twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, without change. Naturally, emotions vary throughout a day. Rich indicates that she feels it is unreasonable to expect a mother to love her children unconditionally at all times (23).

As described in *Representations of Motherhood* by Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, the ideal "good" mother is all-giving, ever-present and self-sacrificing. She is substantial and plentiful; she is not destroyed or overwhelmed by the

demands of her child (1994:2-3). This view of motherhood has been argued by some radical feminists, such as Rich, to be a socially supported myth designed to keep women in their place (3). Rich notes that patience, self-sacrifice and the willingness to socialise a human being are qualities supposedly innate in a mother (1986:37). But there is a very big difference between the act of Margaret Garner and the woman who decapitated her two young children on the front lawn. One of the main differences between radical feminism and womanism that I am interested in analysing is the way in which these two schools of thought view motherhood.

Bassin *et al*. highlight a radical feminist camp, in that personhood and subjectivity necessitate moving beyond, or avoiding altogether, home and motherhood. They show how other women writers such as Betty Friedan, Juliet Mitchell and Shulamith Firestone view the home, motherhood and childrearing as "a prison", an "instrument of oppression" and call for a severance between women and motherhood (6).

By contrast, Toni Morrison provides a womanist viewpoint on motherhood:

> "There was something so valuable about what happened when one became a mother. For me it was the most liberating thing that ever happened …. Liberating because the demands that children make are not the demands of a normal "other". The children's demands on me were things that nobody else ever asked me to do. To be a good manager. To have a sense of humor. To deliver something that somebody else could use. And they were not interested in all the things that other people were interested in, like what I was wearing or if I were sensual. Somehow all of the baggage that I had accumulated as a person about what was valuable just fell away. I could not only be me – whatever that was – but somebody actually needed me to be that." (Moyers and Tucher, 1990:60)

It is evident that radical feminism of the 1980s views motherhood as an oppressive institution or prison, while womanism views motherhood as a liberating experience and something valuable. It is even more interesting, now knowing Morrison's personal view on motherhood, that she would portray her mother characters as violent and murderous beings. Based on the true story of Margaret Garner, Morrison wrote her novel *Beloved* (Salamon, 2012:np).

With regard to feminism, Catherine Campbell, in "The Township Family and Women's Struggles", notes that while women have power within the household, this power is still largely under patriarchal control. Campbell states:

> These men appear to be prepared to acknowledge the power of women in a restricted situational and locational sense: women are powerful within the home, and in situations involving the nurturing or protection of other people [...] but there is often little respect for women's power outside of this sphere. (1990:5)

This rings true for Morrison's presentation of women. Within the household, these women are powerful leaders and decision makers; however, outside the home under the institution of slavery or as represented in the larger society, they are oppressed and undermined by white patriarchy. Feminism places the emphasis on the oppression of women by men, but Morrison's Black women are actually able to relate to their male counterparts better than they do with other white *women*. In *Beloved* when Sethe is near death after escaping the Sweet Home Plantation, she encounters Amy Denver, a poor white woman. The relationship that unfolds between them, although brief, is astounding. Amy does her best to nurse Sethe back to health by sourcing food and water, massaging Sethe's swollen feet, cleaning the wound on her back and helping her give birth to Denver. Amy encourages Sethe to do what she feels is impossible and stays by her side, trusting that she will live through the night. The picture of a white woman massaging a Black woman's feet would be unheard of in the period of time this novel is set. This, however, is woman to woman, natural and comfortable. Nevertheless, Sethe does not trust Amy even though she is another woman. When Amy asks Sethe for her name, she lies and says "Lu" (Morrison, 2011:40). This is possibly because of their differing historical and racial backgrounds. In Sethe's mind, a white person cannot be trusted; they are two women in completely different settings in life.

Sula depicts the man to woman relationship, one totally different from the white woman to Black woman relationship, effectively:

> [Ajax] did not speak down to [Sula] or at her, nor content himself with puerile questions about her life or monologues of his own activities. Thinking she was possibly brilliant, like his mother, he seemed to expect brilliance from her, and she delivered. And in all of it, he listened more than he spoke [….] [H]is refusal to baby and protect her, his assumption that she was both tough and wise – all of that coupled with a wide generosity of spirit only occasionally erupting into vengeance sustained Sula's interest and enthusiasm. (Morrison, 1998:128)

This is not a woman oppressed by her male counterpart, but rather, a woman admired and respected; an equal. This can be contrasted to a white husband and wife from *A Mercy*:

> D'Ortega's wife was a chattering magpie, asking pointless questions – How do you manage living in snow? – and making sense-defying observations, as though her political judgement were equal to a man's. (Morrison, 2009:16)

The focus then is not so much a gendered oppression, but rather a racial oppression as Black men and women are more trusting of each other, viewing one another as equals. In contrast, between Black and white women, although it can be assumed that they have an understanding with one another because of their mutual gender, their differing races cause a misunderstanding and inability to relate to and trust one another fully.

Cherry mentions that because motherhood has been shaped and commodified according to patriarchal norms, women do not own motherhood (2001:91). Adrienne Rich explains that male control is evident in the institution of motherhood and can be seen in the male dispensation of birth control, abortion, the economic dominance of the father over the family and the usurpation of the birth process by the male medical establishment (1986:34). The social side of motherhood reveals how women are disempowered within this institution. The cooking, cleaning and socialisation of children are regarded as solely the mother's responsibility, and this expectation is unquestioned and accepted by women on the silent understanding that that is the role of a woman and mother (92). Due to the notion that all women possess within themselves a natural maternal instinct, they are expected to mother in order to lead fulfilling lives (93). This has become the social norm of contemporary society.

Gertrude Shope, president of the African National Congress Women's League, said the following, as cited by Cherryl Walker:

> Women bring life to this world and they have a duty to make sure that this life is preserved and protected. There is a need for us to come together regardless of our colour to look at the situation in [South Africa] and respond as women and mothers. (1995:418)

Shope was appealing to the women of a country divided by violence and strife. She appealed for a response to the challenging political situation as women and as mothers. She suggests that the fact alone that they are women means that they bring life and peace through their natural maternal instincts. While this is a noble call to peace, I do not believe that it is fair to

place all women under this category, suggesting that because they are women, they are mothers and thus responsible for life and peace. I do not agree that there is a thing such as "natural maternal instinct" because this leaves a gap for women who are unable, or choose not, to bear children. I believe that if there is such a thing as "natural maternal instinct", then there will equally be a thing as "natural paternal instinct". If women are appealed to because they are mothers and life givers, men can be appealed to because they are fathers, life givers and an equal option in solving political violence and upheaval.

In her article "Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa", Cherryl Walker highlights the notion that motherhood is believed to be at the core of every woman's identity. Although Walker's study is based in South Africa, many of her ideas correspond with Western ideas of motherhood. She asserts that women seem to have a silent agreement around the responsibilities of motherhood: they are to nurture, to protect and to preserve (1995:418). To nurture, protect and preserve are womanist values which we understand Morrison is in agreement with. Why then, would she seemingly depart from these values in the depiction of her female characters?

Patricia Collins remarks that motherhood can in fact serve as a site where Black women can express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting themselves and the belief in Black women's empowerment (1990:133). A womanist would view children as valued because they are one of the few things that a Black woman can call her own and because motherhood signifies maturity (Cherry, 2001:98). Black women found that they faced a threefold obstacle: of race, class and gender. Motherhood as an oppressive institution was not something that womanists agreed with. Motherhood, in fact, held many positive attributes that they openly welcomed.

Black women are considered to be outside the confines of true motherhood for two reasons: because they are Black, and because they descended from slaves. Motherhood requires chastity and sexual modesty. These are two attributes that white culture believed Black women did not possess. Motherhood thus holds a specific, and very different, definition for Black women. Theirs involves the devaluation of their sexuality and the "othermothering" of white people (108).

Morrison's writing recognises motherhood and child-rearing as a site of empowerment, and therefore allows women to carry the major roles of the three novels under scrutiny. Her male

characters do not hold as much weight and force as her female characters, but rather, take background positions. Most of the time, the picture of Morrison's women is not the stereotypical gentle, caring and understanding mother who nurtures and preserves. Instead, they are violent, they abandon, they reject and they kill. Departing from stereotypical ideas of what a mother represents, Morrison shows even this violence and emotional abuse as a selfless love and protection towards her children. These mothers are the leaders of their families, instilling uncommon values of strength and a new definition of womanhood. Morrison, in a way, breaks down the notion of "natural maternal instinct".

In *Beloved, A Mercy* and *Sula* women are the heads of all the homes described. They are the ones fulfilling both gender roles, doing household chores, raising children, heading a home and bringing in the family wage. The male characters of the three novels are not portrayed as particularly strong or powerful. This role appears to be reserved for Morrison's female characters. Morrison formulates respect for her female characters in various situations not only within the household, but outside too; on the streets, in confronting others and in standing their ground.

Slaves as Breeders

In order to understand why Morrison portrays her mother characters as the heads of homes and as so violent, a background to the oppression historical slave women endured must be provided. Slavery oppressed both Black men and women severely, leaving a trail of psychological trauma for its victims to deal with. Perhaps a large part of why womanism considers child-rearing the site of empowerment lies in the history of slave women being considered breeders and not allowed to fully mother or raise their children freely. To be able to mother one's children would be considered empowerment because, as noted by Kenneth Stampp in *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, "The master, not the parents, decided at what age slave children would be put to work in the fields" (1978:57). Slave children were frequently separated from their mothers, or sold or killed without their mother's knowing. Women were exploited and her title became one of breeder. Stampp explains the situation of slave breeding compellingly:

> The evidence of systematic slave breeding is scarce indeed, not only because it is unlikely that many engaged in it but also because written records of such activities would seldom be kept. But if the term is not used with unreasonable literalness, if it means more than owner-coerced matings, numerous shreds of evidence exist which indicate that slaves were reared

> with an eye to their marketability – that the domestic slave trade was not "purely casual". Many masters counted the fecundity of Negro women as an economic asset and encouraged them to bear children as rapidly as possible. In the exporting states these masters knew that the resulting surpluses would be placed on the market. Though few held slaves merely to harvest the increase or overtly interfered with their normal sexual activity, it nevertheless seems proper to say that they were engaged in slave breeding. (246)

For producing the desired number of children, women slaves were rewarded by their masters in the form of lighter workload and gifts (250). This depicts how poorly slaves were treated; maintained as though animals.

According to James Morgan in *Slavery in the United States: Four Views*, he notes that male slaves were forced to accept the sexual exploitation of their slave wives as being part of the slave family structure. Masters could have sexual relations with a slave's wife, allowing the slave husband no rights to human feelings (1985:137). In this way, the family structure among slaves became exceedingly fragmented. It is difficult to imagine how slave husbands and wives were able to move forward positively in a functional marriage if these men were seeing their wives sexually abused and exploited on a regular basis. This type of interference would cause a long line of broken relationships.

Further supporting the dehumanising concept of "slave breeding" is Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's belief that certain states had a specific system in which to successfully and fruitfully breed their slaves:

> Systematic breeding […] involves two interrelated concepts: 1, interference in the normal sexual habits of slaves to maximize female fertility through such devices as mating women with especially potent men, in much the same way as exists in the breeding of livestock; 2, the raising of slaves as the main objective, in much the same way as cattle or horses are raised. (1974:78)

Interestingly, the three critics that I have taken into account: Kolchin in *American Slavery: 1619-1877*, Stampp in *The Peculiar Institution* and Morgan in *Slavery in the United States: Four Views*, say nothing about slave women resisting their oppression as breeders as one would imagine they would have. Orlando Patterson, however, in *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, says that slave women refused to reproduce out of outrage as a gynaecological revolt against the system (1982:133). While this can be looked at as a revolt

against the institution of slavery, the slave women who were asserting their right to choose still had their choice shaped by the institution of slavery. Slavery, even in cases such as these, was still the entity that directed a slave's decision to have or not have children.

Women quickly became the heads of homes under enslavement because marriage between slave men and women was not considered legally binding. Men were sold frequently and without care about the family they would be separated from. Furthermore, a "family" was defined as consisting only of a mother and her children, excluding the husband or father (Stampp, 1978:267). In contemporary society, Rich too, recognises this as a reality in saying that "the 'family' really means 'the mother,' who carries the major share of child-rearing" (1986:54).

Enslaved parents had little to do with the raising of their children. Stampp remarks:

> Children soon learned that their parents were neither the fount of wisdom nor the seat of authority [….] Lacking autonomy, the slave family could not offer the child shelter or security from the frightening creatures of the outside world. (343)

Husbands were not the heads of homes under slavery. His role, as viewed by slave-owners, was that of labourer and sex partner to his wife for breeding purposes. An overseer in Georgia was recorded telling his employer that he "[considers] every child raised as part of the crop" (250). To be allowed to mother, or parent, under these conditions would thus be the site of empowerment. Epitomising the role of women under slavery is the following explanation:

> The typical slave family was matriarchal in form, for the mother's role was far more important than the father's. In so far as the family did have significance it involved responsibilities which traditionally belonged to women, such as cleaning house, preparing food, making clothes, and raising children. *The husband was at most his wife's assistant, her companion, and her sex partner. He was often thought of as her possession* ("Mary's Tom"), as was the cabin in which they lived. It was common for a mother and her children to be considered a family without reference to the father. (344, emphasis added)

Morrison's portrayal of women-led households then represents a very realistic image of slave family life and to a point, explains the contemporary Western culture of absent fathers which will be covered in the following chapter. The violence that is carried out in Morrison's

characters lies in the "[mother's] grief at being separated from her children. Often mothers fought desperately to prevent traders from carrying off their children, and often husbands and wives struggled against separation when they were torn apart" (348).

The construction of slave women as breeders resulted in women not being fully allowed to access their role as mother to their children. They were sexually exploited, used for population growth and financial gain. Women therefore had to find ways in which to protect themselves against the emotional pain of being separated from their children without their consent. This emotional guarding often took the appearance of emotional or physical violence as inflicted by the mother on her children. Baby Suggs is an example of this. Her emotional detachment can be found in her unwillingness to bond too intimately with any of her children. This is because all of her children are either killed or sold, and so she vows to never give her love fully to any of them in an attempt at guarding her heart:

> Anyone Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. (Morrison, 2011:28)

This quotation gives us insight into the various forms of oppression endured within the confines of slavery. It is a heavy burden on a mother's heart to have to emotionally detach herself from those she loves in order to guard against emotional trauma. Baby Suggs is so used to losing the people she loves that she stops holding onto them too closely. The fact that all these individuals are "hanged, rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" shows us that slave-owners viewed their slaves entirely as property. One would normally hang clothing, rent and loan out books, buy and store groceries and mortgage a house but in this instance we are referring to *people*. The giveaway in this passage is that slaves were also "won", "stolen" or "seized". This reveals the true value attached to these slaves in that they were a prize to be won and a treasure to be stolen. This was value that they were stripped of and denied.

The comment that "Baby's eight children had six fathers" displays to us the sexual exploitation that she has endured at the hands of many men. She is viewed as property; a commodity that can be easily replaced and a thing whose job it is to produce children, thereby supporting the peculiar institution. How can one resist such a system if not through

violence, be it in the form of self-harm, seemingly harsh discipline to train children and in some cases, the ending of someone's life? The oppressed resisting such a system through violence confers the power to oppress the oppressor.

When Baby Suggs bore her children, she learned quickly that there was no point in "learning their features". Speaking about her children Baby Suggs contemplates:

> The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway [….] She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked. Did Patty lose her lisp? What color did Famous' skin finally take? Was that a cleft in Johnny's chin or just a dimple that would disappear soon's his jawbone changed? (164)

Sethe's mother, known only as "Ma'am", is likewise a mother whose violence is depicted through emotional detachment; however, she is also somewhat physically violent toward Sethe. Sethe has infrequent flashbacks to memories of her mother whilst residing on the Sweet Home Plantation. She does not know what her mother's name is, and remembers her mother speaking in another language that she does not know or remember either. This depicts from the outset the detachment and distance between mother and child. Because Ma'am was expected to work the field right after giving birth, Sethe is raised by a wet nurse named Nan. Sethe would not have known who her mother was, had it not been for someone pointing Ma'am out to the young Sethe and identifying her.

When Denver is speaking to her mother, she asks if Ma'am ever "fixed up her hair". Sethe recalls the distance she experienced from her mother when she responds:

> I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks – that's the way the others did. Then she went back in the rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was […] She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember. (2011:72)

Because women were considered weak and fragile, the fact that Black women were birthing their children in between working created the myth that Black women were not built with the same "material" as white women and therefore, they were not "real" women at all (Cherry,

2001:112). This fashioned the misleading desensitisation that Black women were harder and stronger and could be treated cruelly because they seemingly did not experience pain in the same manner as white women.

The memory of distance between Sethe and her mother makes sense to Sethe now that she is older and having experienced enslavement herself. Ma'am was distant not by choice, but because of the conditions they were living under. Sethe was, after all, the only baby that Ma'am had wanted to keep. Under slavery, quality time between mothers and children was not cultivated. The institution of slavery did not allow for parent-child relationships to be developed and strengthened. Morrison draws attention to the destruction and breakdown of the family unit as caused by slavery.

Ma'am's emotional detachment and violence towards her children differs slightly from Baby Suggs's emotional detachment. While Baby Suggs was creating distance to protect herself emotionally from future upheaval, Ma'am creates distance because she is exploited and motherhood is forced upon her. Sethe recalls a time when Nan spoke to her about her mother:

> She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away." (Morrison, 2011:74)

What does one choose then: to have children forced upon one, only to have them killed or sold later, or resist the whole system now, to one's own detriment, by aborting? Angela Davis in *Women, Race, and Class* made the claim that Black women have been aborting themselves since the earliest days of slavery (1981:205). This rings true for Morrison's mother characters. By "aborting" their children in the form of throwing them overboard, neglecting them or detaching themselves emotionally so as not to fall too in love with them, they are aborting a part of themselves. This abortion is a tremendous violence against not only the child, but against the mother too and it happened over and over again. "Abortion is violence: a deep, desperate violence inflicted by a woman upon, first of all, herself" (Rich, 1986:269).

Mothering Violence (Mothers)

The concept of mother violence by Amanda Putnam in her article "Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy*", looks at the manner in which Morrison's slave women carry out violent acts against

both themselves and their children as a way in which to resist an oppressive system. This violence is often demonstrated through violent actions of mothers towards their children, and then later, through these children learning and visiting similar violent actions upon themselves and others.

This violence, albeit uncomfortable and shocking, is not an unusual display for Morrison. Putnam remarks in this regard:

> Specifically, many of Morrison's female characters turn to violence – sometimes verbal but more frequently physical – and, in doing so, attempt to create unique solutions to avoid further victimization. This process demonstrates the ways in which violence itself can become an act of rebellion, a form of resistance to oppressive power. (2011:25)

Morrison's mothers depart from the picture-perfect vision of gentle, warm and soft mothers. Hers, instead, are violent. They slit their daughters' throats, they abandon their daughters and they burn their sons to death. Putnam remarks that: "Black women are not powerless or without options; instead, they can create new patterns and refuse socialized gender and racial identities that attempt to constrain them" (26). The options that these women have are often disturbing to readers.

The most arresting example of the mother-child relationship being scrutinised can be found in *Beloved*. Sethe's decision to slit her daughter's throat, rather than allow the child to be captured into slavery, holds many avenues for discussion. The avenue I wish to delve into sympathises with Sethe's actions and looks at mother violence as an assertion of power in the face of severe oppression. Schoolteacher, his nephew, the slave-catcher and a sheriff arrive to recapture Sethe. Sethe takes action:

> Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby towards the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere […] the old nigger boy, still mewing, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arc of its mother's swing. (Morrison, 2011:175)

Sethe's motive for this brutal action is ironically one of selflessness. Her violence can be looked upon as a *mothering* act; a mothering violence. Knowing the suffering and loss of

identity she endured in slavery, she takes action in protecting her children from this life. Sethe's actions shock and for a moment, paralyse everyone present. The passage continues:

> Right off it was clear, to Schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. (175)

There was nothing for Schoolteacher to claim, because Sethe had claimed everything before he got the chance to. While the white slave-owners stand by watching Sethe attempt to kill her children, it is Stamp Paid, a Black man, who intervenes to stop the damage. The picture of the white men standing by watching, and then disappointed that there was nothing there for them to take, depicts a depraved and divided society.

Sethe's children, although at the time too young to understand their situation in slavery, cannot fully grasp the oppression and breakdown of identity and family structure that they will endure as time progresses. They are too young to be working the field and thus have no discernment of the weight of their mother's decision to get them to freedom. They do not yet understand enslavement pitted against freedom. In an attempt to defy the oppression Sethe experiences at the hands of her owner, she makes the decision to save her children and takes her daughter's life. Being free from slavery, she has been opened up to a multitude of opportunities to make her own decisions even though her freedom lasts only 28 days. These 28 days are enough for her to be birthed as a mother outside of slavery. Christopher Peterson remarks that by Sethe killing her own daughter in front of the slave-owner, she is, in a way, claiming that child as her own (2006:554). Slave-owners held the "godly" power of life or death over their slaves, but now Sethe is in a position where she can take this power into her own hands. She takes her daughter's life before the slave-owner gets a chance to. This can be read as Sethe disrobing the slave-owner of his power, and dressing herself in his authority. She displays to him what is hers and what is definitely not his. Putnam remarks that "by choosing death for their children, these mothers are definitively demonstrating the ways in which fatal violence becomes an act of rebellion and a form of resistance" (Putnam, 2011:36).

In Andrea O'Reilly's *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, she suggests that "Morrison rejects the definitions and roles of motherhood offered by the dominant American culture and instead defines and positions maternal identity as a site of power for

black women" (2004:1). This is exactly what we find when Sethe chooses to take her daughter's life. That, for her, is the site of power; controlling the situation in front of Schoolteacher. Susan Babbitt strikingly observes:

> While the mother, Sethe, attempts to kill her children because she loves them, she has been denied a parental relationship to her children by slavery. Indeed, the mother cannot be a mother to the children she has borne because they are not hers under slavery. (1994:3)

I do not maintain that Sethe had no relationship with her children whilst enslaved. In fact, she desperately loved them with a consuming passion, and we are provided with frequent flashbacks to her care and concern for their well-being. Her motherly love and care are evident the moment she is free as she accesses her right to fully be mother, thereby making the motherly decision to keep her children away from slavery for the rest of their lives.

Violence as rebellion and a form of resistance is evident in varying degrees throughout the text. However, this choice is not a selfish act on behalf of Sethe. Although demonstrating her power before her master, she is simultaneously displaying her love for her children. It is not only an act of rebellion in the face of oppression, but doubles as a selfless act of protection. She loves them fiercely enough to kill them, rather than allow them to be brought up in a life of slavery and torture. Morrison draws attention to the idea that rather than being a mentally unstable woman, Sethe is actually a selfless mother who is trying to move her children to safety. Her mind is fully switched on, and like her mother, Ma'am, Sethe can either choose an oppressed lifetime of slavery and destruction, or she can make a call right here and now, albeit to her own detriment. Her options are not favourable, but we can sympathise that in a case such as this, death is the better choice.

Although we are initially deeply dismayed by Sethe's actions and view her as a cruel woman who cold-bloodedly murders her child, in truth, Sethe is putting her children's needs above her own. Her actions are carefully explained:

> No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (Morrison, 2011:192)

Morrison, through this passage, draws attention to a different manner through which to analyse the situation. We are given insight into Sethe's motives: to protect what is most precious, fine and beautiful to her. In an interview, Morrison has said that Sethe was absolutely right to do this, but she had no right to do it (1987:np).

Baby Suggs is an example of a mother whose violence is represented in emotional detachment. She is both a mother and grandmother who protects and sacrifices in the midst of chaos. She enters the scene to restore order after Sethe has slit Beloved's throat. She bathes and binds the wounds of the two boys and tries to coax Sethe into handing over the dead child she desperately clings to. Carrying the crying infant, Baby Suggs says to Sethe: "It's time to nurse your youngest" (Morrison, 2011:179). In the midst of this unrest, Sethe is still a mother with responsibilities. She must still carry out her duties. Baby Suggs's cool and calm temperament and tidying of the violent scene that has taken place just moments before can appear to be a detached and unemotional response. However, I view this response as that of an exceedingly strong woman, who, rather than hysterically adding to the trauma, quietly and quickly, to the best of her ability, restores order and plants Sethe's feet back down on earth.

Chapter 16 draws to a close with Baby Suggs asking for the Lord's pardon. She speaks on behalf of her family; she appeals to the Lord to pardon Sethe for the actions that took place, understanding where they stemmed from but not condoning them. Perhaps not explicitly blaming herself for the actions of Sethe, she does find it necessary to ask forgiveness on behalf of Sethe nonetheless.

"Mark the Mark on Me Too" (Daughters)

The violent actions of mothers towards their children is observed and learned by these children who grow up to adopt similar habits. Sethe, Denver, Beloved, Florens, Sula and Nel are all daughters who learn violence first from their mothers. They are taught that mothers give life and can end life if and when they wish, they learn that self-harm is an acceptable manner in which to oppress an oppressor, and they learn to become detached from emotional experiences such as the death of friends and loved ones around them.

Most heart-breaking is the memory Sethe recalls of her mother taking her outside to show her a mark of a circle and a cross burnt onto her skin under her breast. Ma'am says to Sethe: "this is your ma'am. This, I am the only one got this mark. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark" (2011:72). This scares

Sethe; to hear her mother talking about being identified if she is ever discovered dead. But the childlike mind of Sethe, wanting to be like her mother, says: "Mark the mark on me too". Ma'am slaps Sethe across the face. This, however harsh and cruel as it may seem, is once again a mothering type of violence. This is a mother trying to get her daughter to understand the weight of the situation they are in. Ma'am slaps Sethe because she does not want to imagine her daughter dead, she does not want to imagine having to mark her young daughter to be able to identify her body should anything happen to her. Ma'am wants Sethe to realise that getting a mark burnt onto her skin to be identified is not normal and not how they should be living. She wants Sethe to resist slavery. Her slap is a motherly discipline to get her daughter to not wish the trauma of slavery upon herself. Sethe, as an older woman with children of her own, suddenly understands her mother's motives from that day. The mothering violence that is constantly represented through these oppressed mothers can therefore be viewed not as abuse but rather as a tool for rearing children to resist oppression.

Marianne Hirsch's chapter, "Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", from Bassin *et al*.'s *Representations of Motherhood*, claims that although Sethe was not physically marked by the same mark her mother has under her breast, she is still marked by her mother's history of infanticide which she ends up repeating (1994:102). This is true not only for Sethe, but the other female characters that we encounter too. They are marked individually by their mothers' actions.

Most of Morrison's characters learn their violence from their mothers and pass it down to their own children later in life. Affirming this point of view is Putnam's opinion:

> Most of Morrison's youthful characters learn about violence within a matrilineal home setting, when they are exposed to violence toward, and then from, their mothers and grandmothers. At times enslaved but always oppressed, these adult women characters are abused frequently by multiple sources: spouses, parents, employers, slave-owners, and community members. Consequently, the women's mistreatment is then redirected toward others – often children – within the family. (2011:26)

This violence, then, is inter-generational and is often used as a tool to teach coping mechanisms in the face of racism and oppression. The learning of this violence, as experienced within the home setting, is evident throughout the texts. Putnam points out that while the readers are profoundly aware of the violence between generations, the characters themselves do not speak about this violence and their response to it (29). In *Beloved*, as

earlier mentioned, Sethe learns infanticide subconsciously from her mother when she hears that Ma'am threw all her babies overboard.

Sethe is exposed to the concept of mothering violence from a young age. The actions of Ma'am are told to her in a fairly casual manner as if they are of the norm and can be expected or at least easily explained and justified. Sethe learns early that as a mother, one has the right to end her child's life if one feels it is necessary. She carries this out herself at a later stage in her own life. Although Sethe's mother was immensely detached, Sethe is just the opposite when she becomes a mother. Sethe is violent, but her violence can almost be justified based on her situation under slavery, as can Ma'am's. Sethe loves her children fiercely, and is willing to go to extreme lengths for their safety. She dedicates her life to being a "good" mother based on what she remembers missing from her own mother. While Ma'am never "fixed" Sethe's hair as a child, she makes sure that she does the opposite for her own children when she gets the opportunity. Sethe does this by "braiding, puffing, tying and oiling" Beloved's hair so much that it begins to make Denver nervous to watch (Morrison, 2011:282). Sethe overcompensates for the mother that she missed out on.

Although we do not have much insight into Denver's life and the potential violence she holds or has learned from her own mother, we do know that she fears her mother due to the stories she has heard regarding her murdered sister. Her two older brothers, who were possibly old enough at the time of the disaster to recall fragments of the incident, leave home at a young age to escape from Sethe and the ghost that torments their home. They teach Denver some "die-witch" tricks in case she ever needs to defend herself against their mother and the ghost at a later stage in life. This depicts the unfortunate misunderstanding of their mother's actions. Equally unhelpful is the fact that no one ever speaks about the incident. Communication is not open among these family members. This could be because Sethe is trying to repress her painful history because she assumes that her children understand. Sethe does not explain to her children when they are older what transpired or why she tried to take all of their lives. Her children unfortunately could not relate to her on a level of slavery because they did not fully experience it themselves. They therefore would have no understanding of her actions unless she explained the background and build-up to that fateful day.

Some other misunderstood women characters are met in *Sula*. Eva Peace is a matriarch who sits in a wagon on the third floor "directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a

constant stream of boarders" (Morrison, 1998:30). Eva is such a strong character that, as the book describes: "The wagon was so low that […] adults, standing or sitting, had to look down at her. But they didn't know it. They all had the impression that they were looking up at her" (31). Although details are unclear, it is believed that Eva amputated her own leg in order to gain financial support for herself and her children. In this regard, Eva is another example of a mother who makes violent decisions when it comes to protecting her children.

When Eva's son, Plum, returns home from the war battling drug addiction, Eva makes the decision to burn him to death. It is a seemingly cruel action of Eva's; as "the whoosh of flames engulfed him, she shut the door and made her slow and painful journey back to the top of the house" (48). She essentially turns her back on her son as he burns to death in the room behind her. We as readers cannot reconcile this callous act from a mother; one whom we trust to be nurturing, warm, kind and gentle. However, this passage is given a remarkably gentle and calm description by Morrison:

> He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said. Knowing that it was so he closed his eyes and sank back into the bright hole of sleep. (47)

In this description, there is no hysteria or a callous and violent mother. Rather, Eva is lovingly and gently putting her son to sleep, somewhere away from his suffering. The experience is "light", a "blessing" and a relaxed "sinking". Later, Eva explains to Hannah her reasoning behind killing Plum:

> It was such a carryin' on to get him born and to keep him alive. Just to keep his little heart beating and his little old lungs cleared and look like when he came back from that war he wanted to git back in. After all that carryin' on, just gettin' him out and keeping him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well … I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. […] I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again. (71)

Eva finds it necessary to end her son's life rather than watch him slowly kill himself through drug addiction. She suggests that Plum was turning back into a baby, with the drugs altering his perception of reality. Remembering how difficult it was to raise him and keep him alive as a child, she finds no other effective way out of a history that appears to be repeating itself.

Eva sees the life-cycle moving in the wrong direction. Plum should metaphorically become mother to her as she ages. He should not be trying to "re-enter her womb".

Eva's action of burning Plum to death unsettles Hannah. Now doubting confidence in her mother's love, she approaches Eva and asks if she ever loved her and her siblings. Eva takes offense at the question and curtly answers: "No. I don't reckon I did. Not the way you're thinkin'" (65). The conversation gets heated as Eva and Hannah continue on the topic:

> [Eva:] "You sittin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't." [Hannah:] "I didn't mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?" [Eva:] "Play? Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895. Just 'cause you got it good now you think it was always this good? 1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies [….] You want me to tickle you under the jaw and forget 'bout them sores in your mouth? Pearl was shittin' worms and I was supposed to play rang-around-the-rosie?" (68)

Although this is a harsh response, we can sympathise with Eva at the reality and honesty of her answer. Knowing her background of being left to raise three children single-handedly, having nothing but "three beets" to her name, we could find it offensive that her daughter would ever ask such a question. To Eva, it is obvious that she loved her children; had she not, she would never have gone to the drastic measures she did in order to keep them all alive and healthy.

This emotional violence directed at Hannah is then foreshadowed again in the next generation. Sula as a young girl overhears her mother, Hannah, discussing with a friend that although she loves Sula, she does not like her, and there is a difference between the two (57). Sula runs to her bedroom where she feels rejected and tearful for a moment. Putnam says that in this way "home becomes a place to learn pain, while community becomes a place to act it out" (2011:27). Sula learns violence from her mother, who learns it likewise from *her* mother. It is surprising that Hannah would even say such a thing about her daughter, knowing the pain she felt herself at hearing that her own mother did not love her in the way she wanted to be loved. In Eva's eyes, putting an end to Plum's suffering by killing him was surely an act of love; an act of putting his needs above her own.

Eva is seen to make violent decisions in her expressions of love. Although she violently burns her son to death, this is the same mother who throws herself out of a three storey building window in order to save her daughter Hannah, who has caught fire. Sula observes these violent occurrences taking place: the act of her grandmother jumping out of a window, the act of her mother being burnt, the story of her uncle Plum being burnt to death and the story of Eva amputating her own leg, and Sula becomes marked by violence herself. When Hannah is engulfed in flames in their garden, Sula stands on the porch watching, offering no help to her mother. When Eva raises this with friends, they suggest that it is normal and that Sula was probably "struck dumb" from shock. Eva, however, disagrees with this idea and remains convinced that Sula "had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralysed, but because she was interested" (Morrison, 1998:78). This presents a very callous picture of Sula to the reader from the outset. However, we can understand where this behaviour stems from. Sula has heard numerous stories about her abusive grandmother and has observed many a violent manner in which issues are managed.

Perhaps Sula is sorely misunderstood in all of these violent actions. When Sula and Nel are playing with Chicken Little, it is Sula who is a gentle and kind friend to Chicken Little while Nel is the harsh and detached one. Although Sula is the one who picks Chicken Little up and begins swinging him, it is Nel who appears to have a more violent response than Sula when Chicken Little lands in the water and disappears. Sula is terrified when Chicken Little does not resurface from the water, but it is Nel who remarks: "somebody saw" (61). Nel's response is misplaced and unusual and indicates that she feels that what has happened needs to be concealed rather than rectified. She shows no emotions of remorse or terror, but rather places emphasis on the need to conceal what has occurred. Sula is the one who runs to Shadrack's house in an attempt to find help, but then runs away in fear of the man. We are able to sympathise with Sula's actions of wanting to cover up the occurrence because she is a child following orders from another child whom she admires. Nel could be viewed as the dominant figure in this picture who persuades and regulates decision-making.

Perhaps Nel is the character who should be focused on for embodying a more chilling violence than Sula. As readers, we criticise Sula's actions by default because she flows loosely wherever she wishes. Sula comes off as explicitly callous and unmerciful, but Nel is implicitly violent. Sula was the one engaging in play with Chicken Little while Nel removed herself from the activity entirely. We do not pay much attention to her, since most of the focus is on Sula and how the community views her.

Sula is quickly accused of being violent, but her violence can be read as an inconceivable strength. When walking home from school, Nel and Sula are confronted by a group of boys who regularly threaten the two girls. Sula, determined to take matters into her own hands, reveals a knife and slashes off the tip of her finger. This shocks the four boys, who stare open-mouthed at the wound. Sula then says: "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (54). Putnam effectively explains:

> Regardless of her age, her skin color, or her size, Sula becomes the dominant person in this altercation. She succeeds in rebelling against the standards others have set for her (and others like her), forcing everyone – the boys, Nel, and even readers – to view her differently afterward. (2011:29)

Sula boldly confronts the boys who are older, taller and most certainly stronger than she is. Yet by the end of this self-harming display, she interestingly has the upper hand. The bullies in this scene can represent a multitude of oppressive forces within society. What Sula did by harming herself, rather than attacking the boys, places an astonishing amount of power in her hands. She controls the situation at that moment, and all moments after that. She suddenly changes from the oppressed to the oppressor. This act, however intimidating, is good. It displays a young woman who will stand her ground and one who is not afraid to defend the defenceless. She will not tolerate oppression, and demonstrates her strength and self-worth through this scene.

This violence against herself, however, is similar to the violence Eva causes against herself in supposedly amputating her own leg as well as in throwing herself out of a window to save Hannah. Furthermore, the use of violence to shock onlookers, and even redirect oppressive power, as Putnam puts it, is seen through Sethe and her choice to take her child's life. This violence, although very difficult to come to terms with, is described by Putnam as a coping mechanism within a world that exploits self-worth (2011:26). As readers, we are able to make sense of these choices as we discover how they are passed down generationally and used as a tool to push back at oppression. Marianne Hirsch, in her *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, notes: "When Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she cut her throat, she is explaining an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children's lives, no voice in their upbringing" (1989:196).

Perhaps what Morrison is trying to illustrate through her violent mothers is the silence around racial oppression as a whole. Nobody seems to react when this violence is acted out. When Eva murders Plum, she is not held accountable for her actions. In *Beloved*, Sethe is taken to prison for slitting her daughter's throat and the story makes it to the newspaper, but there is still a sense of silence and helplessness brought about by the occurrence. Furthermore, the story only makes it to the newspaper not because people are concerned or afraid or willing to help, but because it was entertaining and exciting to read; it was something *different*:

> A whip of fear broke through the heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro's face in a paper, since the face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outran a street mob. Nor was it there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated, since that could hardly qualify as news in a newspaper. It would have to be something out of the ordinary – something white people would find interesting. (Morrison, 2011:183)

Here we see a multitude of violences as inflicted by whites on the Black community, none of which is considered shocking or worthy of news. A Black person being killed, maimed, burned or raped is not something out of the ordinary. The image we have of white people looking upon violence and injustices perpetrated against Blacks without any emotional response can be paralleled to Eva's discomfort in the fact that both Nel and Sula are caught "watching" violence unfold before them, instead of responding to it out of concern. I believe this passive response symbolises the lack of empathy and help offered towards Black individuals who are oppressed based simply on their race.

A most compelling example of this can be found in the drowning of Chicken Little:

> A bargeman, poling away from the shore, found Chicken late that afternoon stuck in some rocks and weeds, his knickers ballooning about his legs. He would have left him there but noticed that it was a child, not an old black man [….] He shook his head in disgust at the kind of parents who would drown their own children. When, he wondered, will those people ever be anything but animals, fit for nothing but substitutes for mules, only mules didn't kill each other the way niggers did [….] [H]e reported his find to the sheriff at Porter's Landing, who said they didn't have no niggers in their county, but that some lived in those hills 'cross the river, up above Medallion. The bargeman said he couldn't go all the way back there [….] The sheriff said whyn't he throw it on back into the water. The bargeman said he never shoulda

> taken it out in the first place. Finally they got the man who ran the ferry twice a day to agree to take it over in the morning. (Morrison, 1998:63-64)

This passage depicts an act of violence against Black people as a whole. A child's body is found in a river and nobody wants to take responsibility, not even the sheriff. Who does one call in such a case if not the sheriff? This shows the harshness and detachment of the white community towards the Black community. A drowned child has been found and it seems to be no surprise. In fact, it annoys the bargeman who assumes the parents are the cause of this drowning. He expresses his repulsion towards the Black community and refers to them as animals. We also know that finding bodies in the river is not something surprising to him. He usually finds adult men, which he would simply ignore. Morrison is trying to show how insignificant and unmissed Black children are in the eyes of an oppressive white community. Her violent mothers killing their children and harming themselves is an implicit cry for their oppression to be noticed. Through reading about these fictional violent mothers, a white audience would be shocked and curious, similarly to the ripple of interest Sethe causes in the newspaper when she murders her child. It is easy for the white community to look upon the violent demonstrations and deem Blacks barbaric and savage, but Chicken Little's discovery in the river by a white man is an equally violent and barbaric response as imposed by the whites. We can assume that the response would have been vastly different, had the bargeman discovered a drowned *white* child rather than a Black child. The community would have responded excessively, mourning with the family and extensively investigating the cause of death. Morrison is calling for the lives of Black people to matter equally.

Affirming this idea is Patricia Hill Collins's viewpoint in "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorising about Motherhood". She asserts the following:

> Although white children can be prepared to fight racial oppression, their survival does not depend on gaining these skills. Their racial identity is validated by their schools, the media, and other social institutions. White children are socialised into their rightful place in systems of racial privilege. Racial ethnic women have no such guarantees for their children. Their children must first be taught to survive in systems that would oppress them. Moreover, this survival must not come at the expense of self-esteem. (1994:68)

Sula's "violence" is also evident in the choices she makes as a grown woman. Her sexual promiscuity can be looked upon as a form of violence towards herself. However, this too is something that she learns from both her mother and grandmother:

> [The] Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, because there were no men in the house, no men to run it. But actually that was not true. The Peace women simply loved maleness. (Morrison, 1998:41)

Sula is detached from the various individuals in her life, who, according to maternal instinct, suggest that she should nurture. While Rich comments that institutionalised motherhood demands of women maternal "instinct" rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realisation, and relation to others rather than creation of self (Rich, 1986:42), Sula is a character who challenges the notion of institutionalised motherhood. When Sula comes back to her hometown, one of her first choices is to have her grandmother, Eva, put in a nursing home. Rather than selflessly nurture and mother her elderly grandmother, Sula sends her away. This is a shock to the community who view it as an adult child's responsibility to nurture her elders. Sula constantly strikes the community, and readers, as lawless and reckless as she is known to have sexual relations with anyone she pleases, including her best friend's husband, Jude. Eva has a conversation with Sula in which she questions Sula's choice not to marry:

> [Eva:] "When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you." [Sula:] "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." [Eva:] "Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man." (Morrison, 1998:92)

Even though both Hannah and Eva themselves were "floatin' around without no man", Eva insists that the difference is that it was not by choice. Sula's making an active choice not to marry or have children is considered selfish by Eva. Fulfilment, according to Eva, will come through Sula mothering. Martha Gimenez notes that to be childless becomes synonymous with failure, and those feelings are reinforced by cultural and social pressure which condemn childlessness (1983:297). Adrienne Rich argues that "woman's status as childbearer has been made into a major fact of her life. Terms like 'barren' or 'childless' have been used to negate any further identity" (1986:11). Likewise, here we see Eva as the cultural and social pressure condemning Sula's choice to "make herself" rather than "make somebody else". Sula chooses self-realisation and ostensibly selfishness in building herself into the woman she wants to be. But how do we know if Sula was actually unable to have children? What if she was sterile?

A Mercy illustrates an example of a "good" mother who inflicts emotional violence on her young daughter. This emotional violence is learned by young Florens who then inflicts

physical violence on others later in life. When Minha Mãe appeals to Jacob Vaark to take her daughter, Florens, rather than her, Florens interprets this decision as abandonment – to her, this is a mother choosing her young son over the elder daughter. Although this action is misunderstood, Florens carries with her a battle of abandonment and rejection wherever she goes. She cannot move past it; it shapes her entire future. The emotional experience she has results in her not being able to trust anyone or enter into healthy relationships as she grows older.

When Florens reaches her lover's house, she discovers that there is a young boy living there. Her lover has adopted the child because he has been orphaned. Florens immediately feels that she will need to compete with the child for the affection of her lover. The little boy triggers memories of her mother rejecting her by sending her away with Jacob Vaark while her baby brother stayed behind, attached to her mother's hip. In her mind, her lover is doing just the same. Florens recounts the following as she recalls the day her mother physically and emotionally abandoned her:

> This happens twice before. The first time it is me peering around my mother's dress hoping for her hand that is only for her little boy. The second time it is a pointing screaming little girl hiding behind her mother and clinging to her skirts. Both times are full of danger and I am expel [….] I worry as the boy steps closer to you. How you offer and he owns your forefinger. As if he is your future. Not me. (Morrison, 2009:133-134)

Though this passage is directed at her lover, it is as if Florens is truly speaking to Minha Mãe, the one who is the root cause in this abandonment and rejection. Florens holds within her a longing to be someone's future. She views herself as neither her mother's future nor her lover's future, and cannot see a future for herself unless someone owns her. In response to Florens's anticipation of her lover "choosing" the little boy over her, deep seated pain of abandonment from emotional abuse erupts into physical violence towards the child:

> That is why I pull his arm. To make him stop. Stop it. And yes I do hear the shoulder crack but the sound is small [….] He screams screams then faints. A little blood comes from his mouth hitting the table corner. Only a little. He drops into fainting just as I hear you shout. I don't hear your horse only your shout and know I am lost because your shout is not my name. Not me. Him. Malaik you shout. Malaik. (2009:137)

Florens feels rejected when her lover calls the boy's name instead of hers. He roughly pushes Florens away to remove her from the site of violence and gently tends to the child. He tells her to leave, and Florens is surprised that he will not even ask for an explanation as to what occurred. What transpired, according to Florens, is not as violent as it appears. As readers, however, we know that it *is* violent. We are horrified to see blood from the child's mouth, that his shoulder has cracked and that he is screaming and fainting repeatedly. This indicates the severity of Florens's actions, yet she downplays them: "the sound is small", blood from his mouth falls "but it is only a little", and "how do you know I am the reason?". Florens says: "No question. You choose the boy. You call his name first" (138). Building to an eruption of her bottled-up pain, Florens attacks her lover with a nearby hammer.

This entire display is sadly due to a misunderstanding of Minha Mãe's asking Sir to take Florens. Minha Mãe is in fact not rejecting her daughter at all, but rather offering her a better life. Minha Mãe recognises that the environment they are currently residing in is becoming increasingly unsafe for her physically developing daughter. Having been raped multiple times herself by the men on the property, she wants to protect her daughter from the same trauma. In an attempt to do just this, Minha Mãe asks Jacob Vaark to take Florens instead of herself. She observes a "kindness" in Jacob's eyes and trusts that her daughter will have a better quality of life with him than where she currently is. She recognises that there "was no animal" in his eyes and trusts that although still enslaved, her daughter will be protected from a variety of physical abuses. Minha Mãe explains her actions in the following way:

> One chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference. You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. (164)

This depicts a woman who, in the midst of slavery, tries to find a way to mother her child effectively. She holds closely her duties as a mother to protect and defend; understanding that in this case it means separation. Minha Mãe actually sacrifices her chance of a better life, and gives it to her daughter instead. If Minha Mãe had been the one who was taken, her son may not have survived and her daughter would have been frequently raped and abused. Florens, unfortunately, at her young age, is not even aware of the abuse her mother is enduring and thus has no comprehension of the motherly sacrifice she is receiving. She is defined by her mother's physical and emotional abandonment.

Daughter, Mother, Mine: Interchangeable Roles

Because families were constantly fragmented either through the selling of children or parents to other plantations or through hard, unceasing labour in the field, "othermothering" was developed to take care of all the children. This is the other side of Black motherhood. "Othermothering" can be defined as the mothering of someone else's children. Although "othermothering" of white children is not evident in the selected texts, there were many cases of the "othermothering" of slave children. In "Thick Love: Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*", Michéle Barzey explains that childcare was considered a problem, an interference with work on the farm or plantation. Mothers had to return to work as quickly as possible and had to leave their baby with a wet nurse (Barzey, 2001:11). Sometimes older children would be responsible for the caring of younger children, and under this poor supervision, many accidents occurred. In *Beloved*, Nan is the wet nurse who "othermothers" Sethe.

Nan seems to be the woman who primarily raises Sethe. Nan is unfit for hard labour as she only has one good arm and thus her responsibility is to be a wet nurse to some of the children on the plantation. She takes the responsibility of breastfeeding Sethe and later, teaching Sethe some of their native language as well as about her mother, Ma'am. Florens in *A Mercy* likewise is taken under the wing of Lina when she arrives at Jacob Vaark's plantation. Both Sethe and Florens are "othermothered".

The notion of "othermothering" can be applied to many of the female characters that Morrison describes. These women seem to mother each other and we even find examples of children mothering their parents. The mother-child relationship is emphasised throughout the three texts. This corresponds with the theory of womanism; an aspect that strives for the survival and wholeness of all people.

The mother-child relationship is rebirthed when the spirit of Beloved, expelled from 124 Bluestone Road, returns in physical form. It is interesting to note that it is as though Beloved is reborn. She comes back at the age she would have been, had she not been killed, and although an adult, holds qualities of a new-born. The chapter begins: "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (Morrison, 2011:60). She spends hours trying to "negotiate the weight of her eyelids", she keeps falling asleep, she is described as having new skin, "lineless and smooth" and "her neck, its circumference no wider than a parlor-service saucer, kept

bending and her chin brushed the bit of lace edging her dress" (60). Like a new-born baby, this woman is unable to hold up her own head.

When Sethe, Paul D and Denver arrive home, they discover the woman on their doorstep. Sethe's bladder fills to capacity immediately and, unable to make it to the toilet in time, she lifts her skirts and relieves herself where she stands. She is unable to control the amount of water endlessly flooding from her, reminding her of the time her water broke when she was pregnant with Denver. This symbolises a rebirthing of the daughter she killed eighteen years previously. The woman, who introduces herself as Beloved, is thirsty and drinks multiple cups of water. This can be paralleled to a baby desperately drinking its mother's milk. As time passes, Beloved becomes more and more attached to Sethe. When Sethe leaves for work each morning, Beloved appears:

> She was in the window at two when Sethe returned, or the doorway; then the porch, its steps, the path, the road, till finally, surrendering to the habit, Beloved began inching down Bluestone Road further and further each day to meet Sethe and walk her back to 124. It was as though every afternoon she doubted anew the older woman's return. (2011:68)

Sethe welcomes this devotion from Beloved. However, as time wears on, Sethe's energy becomes drained. Although this mother-child relationship appears to have become oppressive, Sethe chooses to continue with it. Sethe never had the opportunity to properly love and mother her daughter and likewise, Beloved was never able to define and express love to her mother. Sethe says the following:

> Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing. I didn't have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be [….] I won't never let her go. I'll explain to her. Even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already. I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. (2011:236)

This is a bond openly accepted and not easily broken. Both Beloved and Sethe demonstrate a mother-daughter bond and openness that transcends even the grave (Caesar, 1994:116).

There is significance in the fact that Beloved is a *daughter* rather than a son. The link between motherhood and daughterhood can be extensively analysed. Rich notes that there is a constant pull for a daughter to return to her mother. She puts it in the following way:

> Time after time and in different ways [a daughter] tries to return to her mother, to repossess her and be repossessed by her, to find the mutual confirmation from and with another woman that daughters and mothers alike hunger for, pull away from, make possible or impossible for each other. The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother. That earliest enwrapment of one female body with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected, felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap, or taboo. (1986:218)

Perhaps this "returning" to the mother is what Eva did not want to happen between herself and Plum. In Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel's "Being a Mother and Being a Psychoanalyst: Two Impossible Professions", she says the following: "Freud developed a theory of female sexuality and the male fear of returning to his origins – the womb" (1994:120). This fear of being engulfed into the womb represents a fear of death. Elsa First, in her chapter "Mothering, Hate, and Winnicott", says that "mothers need to be able to return to all the other selves they can be before the child is finished using them to grow up with" (1994:160). With Plum, Eva possibly saw herself as being completely "used up" and needed to return to herself.

These examples of mother-child relationships suggest an entanglement in each other. This entanglement takes the form of a lifecycle where mother becomes child and child becomes mother. Mother and child are seen to develop so strong a bond that they emerge as interchangeable with each other over time. "What a woman is has become hopelessly lost in what a mother is. And what a mother is has become haplessly entangled in what a child is" (117). Beloved begins to suck Sethe's life from her; she becomes thinner and thinner, losing the energy to practise basic hygiene such as washing her face and brushing her hair:

> Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those times when Beloved needed her, Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became [….] She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (Morrison, 2011:295)

In a sense, Sethe becomes child-like, while Beloved grows in strength, height, weight, and should essentially become the mother, caring for the frail Sethe. "A mother is convertible into a baby, and what obtains for a woman is to await the conversion" (First, 1994:117).

> Beloved gave a look that said, So what? Was it past bedtime, the light no good for sewing? Beloved didn't move; said, "Do it," and Sethe complied. [Beloved] took the best of everything – first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through for her children. (Morrison, 2011:284)

The impression that is expressed suggests that Beloved has become the authority figure, making demands on Sethe. If the roles were to reverse in such a way, then the appropriate proceedings would require Beloved to become mother and care for Sethe in her childlike behaviour. But this does not happen. Beloved, rather, becomes an oppressive entity in their house. Sethe tries to gain control over the unravelling situation:

> When once or twice Sethe tried to assert herself – be the unquestioned mother whose word was law and who knew what was best – Beloved slammed things, wiped the table clean of plates, threw salt on the floor, broke a windowpane [….] Nobody said, You raise your hand to me and I will knock you into the middle of next week. Ax the trunk, the limb will die. Honor thy mother and father that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee [….] No, no. They mended the plates [and] swept the salt. (285)

Denver observes the manner in which Sethe serves Beloved, and becomes increasingly uncomfortable about the role reversal in the parent-child relationship between her mother and sister:

> [I]t shamed her to see her mother serving a girl not much older than herself. When she saw [Sethe] carrying out Beloved's night bucket, Denver raced to relieve her of it. But the pain was unbearable when they ran low on food, and Denver watched her mother go without – pick-eating around the edges of the table and stove: […] the crusts and rinds and peelings of things. (285)

Denver arrives at the role of protecting and caring for her gradually deteriorating mother and in it, finds a maturity in herself. She is the one who approaches her neighbours for help. She

reaches out to a community that has shunned both her and her mother and asks for help. Denver is the one who becomes Sethe's salvation.

Likewise in *Sula* the lifecycle repeats itself, but Sula is a character who challenges these norms. Instead of fulfilling her role and becoming mother to her elderly grandmother, Sula puts Eva in a nursing home, removing herself entirely from this responsibility. This can be viewed as a type of emotional violence in the form of abandonment. Florens likewise is a character who explicitly refuses to mother. When she meets Malaik everything in her being recoils and her stance becomes one of competition. Florens would rather be mothered than grow into maturity.

"Nobody Had Her Milk but Me"

As Sethe is originally portrayed as the ever-present mother sustaining her children, the symbol of breastmilk comes to the forefront. Sethe remembers Nan not always having enough breastmilk for all the babies she was nursing. The ability to adequately produce enough milk to sustain her children becomes a defining point for Sethe. Cherry notes that the womb and breasts are symbols of innate maternal instinct (Cherry, 2001:101). In *Beloved* Sethe prides herself on her ability to produce enough milk to sustain all her children. Rich says:

> Woman did not simply give birth; she made it possible for the child to go on living. Her breasts furnished the first food, but her concern for the child led her beyond the one-to-one relationship. (Rich, 1986:101)

Sethe makes constant reference to her breastmilk throughout the novel:

> "I had milk," [Sethe] said. "I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl [….] Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me." (Morrison, 2011:19)

From this, we gather Sethe's deep desire to mother and to sustain her children through her life-giving body. This is why Sethe's assault by Schoolteacher's nephews in the barn is such a defiling robbery of her motherhood:

> "[T]hose boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still." [Paul D:] "They use cowhide on you?" [Sethe:] "And they took my milk." "They beat you and you was pregnant?" "And they took my milk!" (20)

While Paul D is horrified that Sethe's back was ripped open and that this occurred when she was pregnant, Sethe is focused on the fact that her milk was taken from her. She tells Paul D three times that her milk was taken, becoming more outraged by it as she speaks as though he does not notice the weight of what she is saying. This occurrence stays with her, scarring her for life. She talks about it often, unable to move past it. Reference to her breastmilk being taken is made again in her memory of escaping to freedom:

> [T]rying to get to her three children, one of whom was starving for the food she carried […] after her milk had been stolen, her back pulped, her children orphaned, she was not to have an easeful death. (38)

Her breastfeeding ability is the one thing that Sethe holds as evidence of her being a good mother. Kristen Lillvis explains that "Sethe's mythic mothering moves from giving and physically sustaining life to fulfilling her children's (especially Beloved's) emotional needs" (2013:455). However, her dedication to sustaining her children to the extent that she does is to her own detriment, as Beloved becomes overbearing. Denver then takes on the role of mother in the novel, sustaining Sethe by negotiating food from various individuals in their neighbourhood.

In conclusion, the reversal of mother roles represents a departure from stereotypical beliefs about motherhood. The stereotypes of a mother as caring, nurturing, ever-present and self-sacrificing are undermined through Morrison's representation of mothers killing and abandoning their children. The stereotype of gentle, nurturing mother is questioned in the act of violence for the sake of motherly love and care, because Minha Mãe's abandonment of Florens, Eva's burning of Plum and Sethe's killing of Beloved are all self-sacrificing acts.

Morrison's representation of motherhood displays the contrasting camps of womanism as liberating and radical feminism as oppressive. Her female characters are strong; they are the breadwinners, heads of homes and single-parents. However, they are oppressed and

infantilised by the white community in slavery and the working world, having their strengths and capabilities masked. The violence represented stems from a background of slavery, where women are denied the right to own and mother their children. Baby Suggs, in a way, cannot love her children because she is afraid of losing them. Nan is forced to mother children who are not her own. Ma'am refuses to mother those who are forced on her by rape. Sethe mothers in a murderous way that shocks the whole community. Minha Mãe abandons her daughter physically and emotionally. These mothers essentially mark their daughters with the violence they adopt in dealing with oppression. The cycle of violence thus continues as it is passed down generationally.

While this violence can be understood as a response to years of enslavement and abuse, it can also be viewed as a protest by Morrison regarding the passivity of white patriarchy. Through her violent mothers, Morrison shows the contrast in value between Black lives and white lives as well as the distressing injustices the Black community endures without any support or protection. A divide between Black and white communities is strikingly illustrated, where any trauma or violence depicted by or against the Black community is looked at with interest, curiosity and is criticised as savage by the white community. Morrison's violent mothers demonstrate Black people as disposable. Similar to the physical and emotional violence that mothers inflict upon their children is the physical and emotional absence of fathers and husbands. The following chapter will analyse absent fathers and the damage this lacuna causes in the household as well as the community.

Chapter 3

Absent Fathers

> The enemy is not men. The enemy is the concept of patriarchy, the concept of patriarchy as the way to run the world or do things. (Morrison, 1985:35)

This chapter looks at the background positions that Morrison allocates to her male characters as well as the portrayal of absent fathers[4], husbands, sons and friends. The chapter begins by analysing the idea that slave men are emasculated and infantilised. They are emasculated in that they are not allowed to make their own decisions, lead a household, provide for their families or protect their loved ones. They are infantilised in that they are called boys, treated like children who need to be guided and disciplined, and castrated metaphorically on the grounds of their race. They are denied opportunities to participate in work and interact with a community that they are part of. The theme of paternalism is discussed in "Paternal Masters", where the relationship between slave and master is shaped as one of parent and child. This paternalist expression by masters presents a poor model of what it means to father and be fathered for the slave men and children who observe. Fatherhood thus becomes a misunderstood term that translates across multiple generations. Finally, "The Father Gap" looks at the ruptured family unit, the emotional guarding that men engage in to protect themselves from trauma and the various relationships that are affected by absent father figures.

"Fatherhood" is a term that holds little description and emphasis. Unlike motherhood, a role that is composed of unconditional love, care and nurturance, the stereotype is that the role of fatherhood remains to a large extent ambiguous and undemonstrative. Adrienne Rich, in her *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, remarks that to father a child suggests to beget, to provide the sperm which fertilises the ovum. While a man might beget a child through passion or rape and then disappear, he need never see or consider the child or mother again. The mother, however, is faced with tremendous changes to her body and psyche as well as her future (1986:12).

[4] This chapter does not have as much content as the previous chapters of this dissertation because there is scant discussion and analysis on the themes of masculinity and absent fathers in Morrison's texts. The focus appears to be mostly on her female characters. I hope that this chapter will provide a starting point for further study on the topic of masculinity and the role of fathers in Morrison's texts.

Sara Ruddick, in *Representations of Motherhood*, observes that children are physically vulnerable for a number of years, requiring training in emotional, intellectual and social spheres. "To mother", she observes, alludes to "[seeing] children as demanding protection, nurturance, and training and then to commit oneself to the work of trying to meet these demands" (1994:33). Later she asserts that anyone can engage in maternal practice, male or female. However, there seems to be a "father" gap in the descriptions these two critics provide. The role of father is not extensively described. "Mothering" appears to be the blanket term used in reference to childcare while there is barely any reference to the role and contribution of "fathering". Ruddick homes in on this point:

> Mothering *work* is no longer distinctly feminine. A child is mothered by whoever protects, nurtures, and trains her [….] Although biological differences between female and male styles of mothering *might* survive in an egalitarian society, I see no reason to believe – and no reason to doubt – that these differences would make women (and men) more "naturally" suited to protect, nurture, and train children. (1994:35)

While I agree with this statement, that neither male nor female is more naturally suited to protect, nurture and train a child, I do not see why both male and female should be put under the same title as "mother" by Ruddick. Mothering can be viewed as gender-free work but why is there still no clear reference to "fathering"?

Around the 1970s, the role of the father opened as a topic for discussion and analysis. Fathers were becoming active and nurturing figures (Lamb, 1986:6). A shift in the roles and expectations of men with regard to fathering and fatherhood developed. The term "new father" emerged to define men deeply involved in the day-to-day care and rearing of their children (7). Kathryn Backett describes fathering as entailing a man getting to know his children and not being a stranger to them (1987:78). However, Morrison's novels illustrate an issue with regard to absent fathers. Her father characters are indeed strangers to their children as well as to their wives and mothers. Charlie Lewis and Margaret O'Brien, in *Reassessing Fatherhood: New Observations on Fathers and the Modern Family*, have drawn attention to the fact that while a father is assumed to be the "head" of his family, he is simultaneously constrained from being a central character within it (1987:6). This speaks particularly to slave men, who are denied their masculinity and their right to father, guide and support their families both financially and emotionally. They are constrained from being central characters within their households due to the fact that their marriages are not considered legally binding,

they are viewed merely as sex partners and helpers to their wives, they have no control over the upbringing of their children and they are almost totally helpless in terms of defending their wives and children from various kinds of exploitation and abuse. Jarmila Horna and Eugen Lupri describe the father's role as having little to do with actual nurturing and emotional involvement:

> [H]usbands and wives perform different tasks (functions) that combine to meet all family "needs". The roles of the father/husband are those of provider and protector. His contribution to child-rearing consists largely of providing a solid economic base for the family's survival. As an authority figure he transmits and inculcates broadly defined social norms that shape the child's moral and psychological development. (1987:54)

But the slave father/husband is denied even these attributes. He cannot protect his family or provide an economic base for their survival. Being a slave, held captive and humiliated by the slave-owner with his family to witness, removes his aura as an authority figure that is responsible for imparting social norms to shape his child morally. The abuse endured by the father, witnessed by his children, results in psychological damage that the slave father is unable to protect against.

Morrison's portrayal of absent fathers in her novels corresponds to a large extent with the fatherlessness experienced in contemporary Western society. Absent fathers and the role that women acquire to fill this gap results in the former being blamed for a multitude of happenings within their households. Single-parent mothers are seen as challenging the norms of gender roles in that they are the financial providers for their families as well as the carers. Morrison chooses to have her male characters carry background roles; they hold little influence and guidance for the women and children represented. Morrison shows through her novels the strength and leadership abilities that women possess but also the devastation of an absent father-figure within a household. Jean-Louis Flandrin made the following compelling statement regarding a father's position in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

> The authority of a king over his subject, and that of a father over his children, were of the same nature [….] [N]either authority was based on contract, and both were considered "natural". The king and the father were accountable for their governance to God alone. (1979:1)

Enslavement, however, made it difficult for men to govern their families or provide any kind of supportive guidance. The mothers Morrison presents reflect a very real history of slavery. Elkins notes that "a father among the slaves was legally unknown, a husband without the rights of his bed, the state of marriage defined as only that of concubinage [….] Motherhood was clothed in the scant dignity of the breeding function" (Elkins, 1968:55). Through the severance of the family unit under the institution of slavery, a family was considered to only consist of a mother and her children. The father was disposable property that could be sold or removed regardless of his tie to a wife and children.

As analysed throughout this dissertation, the institution of slavery was responsible for the dismantling of family structures. Slaves were looked upon as property, used by slave-owners for economic growth and stability. Because of the notion that slaves were property, they were heavily regulated. They were allowed to marry, although only with the permission of their master, and these marriages were not considered legally binding. Slave-owners took the liberty to split slave husbands from wives according to their economic interest. Kenneth Stampp elaborates that "the state [did not] forbid masters to separate husbands from wives [….] Alabama and Georgia placed rather slight restrictions on the breakup of families when slaves were sold to satisfy creditors" (1978:252). This resulted in ruptured family units within the realm of slavery, carrying through to later generations. This interference with the family unit created identity issues, with children growing up observing life through the lenses of slavery and carrying out familial "norms" of absent, helpless fathers and strong, single mothers later in life, post-emancipation.

Out of the practice of separating family members, women-led households emerged. Black slave men were considered to be disposable property that could be sold at any given moment. This chapter will briefly touch on a few signature points regarding the issue of absent fathers.

Emasculated and Infantilised: Slave Men

Within the terrains of slavery, slave men, treated as property, beaten severely and threatened with being sold thereby separated from their families, began metaphorically castrating themselves in the sense that they would self-sabotage. Similarly to Morrison's women aborting themselves, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, her men castrate themselves. Stampp makes reference to slave men deliberately making themselves unfit for labour. They would throw their shoulders out of joint or cut off their hands and fingers to avoid being sold or, in some desperate cases, commit suicide (1978:128).

Sula makes ironic reference to the love that white men have for Black men. She illustrates their castration in the following passage:

> White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed [….] They think rape soon's they see you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain. Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children – white and black, boys and girls – spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause they think you don't love them. (Morrison, 1998:103)

This passage, while ironic and humorous, creates a certain discomfort. Sula illustrates the emasculation of Black men by the white community. She portrays white men and women as obsessed with Black men and their bodies, as envious of the strength of Black men. She portrays white women as desperate for the attention of Black men in their searching for them under their beds and "longing" to be raped by them. Furthermore, she portrays children as desperately seeking love and affection from their Black fathers. Each of these elements represents a separate issue Black men face: racial castration, racial rape and murder and an issue of absent father-figures. Through *Sula*, Morrison is depicting Black men as constantly emasculated by a deep racism from the white community. Barbara Johnson explains Sula's words strikingly:

> One of the most revolutionary things Morrison does in *Sula* is to deconstruct the phallus as law, patriarchy, and cultural ground, while appreciating the penis for the trivial but exciting pleasures and fantasies it can provide for the female characters in the novel [….] Morrison [restores] the penis to its status as an organ. (1998:79)

Johnson views the previously quoted statement by Sula as Morrison's recontextualising Freudian concepts of penis envy and castration within the framework of American racial and sexual arrangements (79). Marlon Ross, in his chapter "Race, Rape, Castration: Feminist Theories of Sexual Violence and Masculine Studies of Black Protest", views this penis envy as a "penetration panic" experienced by white patriarchy:

> Ironically, this inversion of the white man's phallic assault into the black man's phallic deprivation suggests the extent to which a fantasy of (white) masculine control through penetration is necessarily haunted by *penetration panic*. Not only does race rape represent men's proper desire for control as an out-of-control desire to mutilate other men's phallic weapons; it also *implicitly* insinuates within the normal desire for masculine control through penetration a *normalizing* fear of being penetrated by other, lesser men.
>
> [W]hite men's repulsion for, and thus fascination with, black men's bodies, particularly size and potency of their penises, serves a hidden ground for U.S. practices of racial domination. (2002:315-316)

Castration anxiety refers to feelings of insignificance, and results in a striving not to be dominated. Morrison shows how white men have dominated society and have castrated Black men racially, but also how Black men have been castrating themselves by accepting white dominance in various aspects of society, making themselves absent and unavailable. Susan Mayberry cites Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, who argues: "Morrison's male figures exist in vacuums, are often pathologically out of balance, ungrounded in nature or the feminine, and are isolated from and rejected by masculine white culture" (2003:519). Ross pushes to substitute the term "castration" with emasculation. He observes that emasculation speaks to diminishing the potency of men in the family or in a society in general (2002:311). This castration appears to have begun within the terrains of slavery and continued, post emancipation, into contemporary Western society. This emasculation and "father gap" can be explained as a result of a foundation in slavery. The emasculation of Black men by white men then suggests that some form of power and control *was* initially in their possession; they were, at some point, a threat to white patriarchy. Black men have undergone a stripping of their masculinity and as a result, have felt forced to prove their masculinity over and over again to a society that repeatedly rejects them.

Trudier Harris makes the compelling observation that the suppression of the Black man can be viewed as a form of communal rape (1984:np). The white community violating the Black man's body, forcing him into a state of submission, is a rape of his masculinity and a form of castration. Ross takes this notion further by claiming that "race castration" is not simply about racial domination, but also in its most literal sense, is the unsexing of the male body (2002:306-8). He further remarks:

> Slavery itself could be seen as a sort of race rape whereby the African body itself is seized and taken away as the spoils of imperial competition. In traditional cultures, captivity often comprised one result of warfare, the tangible body of the captive […] forced to live amidst the victors as a […] sign of the warring men's pillaging and plundering ventures into enemy territory. (314)

In Chapter 10 Paul D recalls a period of his enslavement that can be viewed as a form of race rape. He describes the trembling in his chest and shoulder blades that began like a flutter. This trembling would sometimes start in his leg and travel up his spine:

> when they shoved him into the box and dropped the cage door down, his hands quit taking instruction. On their own, they traveled. Nothing could stop them or get their attention. They would not hold his penis to urinate or a spoon to scoop lumps of lima beans into his mouth. The miracle of their obedience came with the hammer at dawn. (Morrison, 2011:126)

This despairing picture of a man experiencing absolute fear removes of him any idealised strength and power. He is helpless and terrified. The men are put in cages while white slave-owners march past them with rifles. The slave-owners are the all-powerful characters, dominating the slaves emotionally, mentally and physically. Their power is oppressive and emasculating to the slaves experiencing it. Their oppression translates as a sort of race rape where the stolen Black men are seized and forced to live amidst their enemy. The slave-owner's dominating presence is able to demand of Paul D's uncontrollable trembling/travelling hands, instant and total obedience. White patriarchal oppression is further depicted in the following description:

> When all forty-six were standing in a line in the trench, another rifle shot signaled the climb out and up to the ground above, where one thousand feet of the best hand-forged chain in Georgia stretched. Each man bent and waited. The first man picked up the end and threaded it through the loop on his leg iron. He stood up then, and, shuffling a little, brought the chain tip to the next prisoner, who did likewise. (126)

The emasculation of Black men by the slave-owners, or white patriarchy, drives the slaves to chain *themselves*. The internalised domination entailing that a man would chain himself depicts the fear and mental enslavement that he has learned to submit to.

This white patriarchy and race rape as endured by Paul D and other nameless slaves is revealed again, post-emancipation, in the character of Jude, from *Sula*. He is denied the opportunity to build the New River Road through Medallion and thus oppressed and dominated by powerful white patriarchy. Whites oppress and deny Black men the opportunity to participate in work that will advance the community. A few young Black men are hired, but not for the road work. They are used for the running of small and seemingly insignificant errands (Morrison, 1998:81). Their capabilities and intelligence are suppressed. Jude dreams of building the new road because he is currently working as a waiter and "his arms ached for something heavier than trays, for something dirtier than peelings" (81). Jude is a strong and capable man, yet he finds himself engaged in light work as a waiter. By refusing Black men their right to work and advance by building a community that they are in fact part of, they are emasculated and infantilised. Ironically, even though these Black men are denied the right to participate in the building of this road, they are the ones who die at the construction site when they march through with Shadrack on "National Suicide Day". This can be viewed as group castration of the Black community.

Morrison presents her male characters as insecure and overcompensating for their emasculation in the face of both the Black and white communities. A most obvious case of overcompensation is found in Jude and his choice to marry Nel because he wants someone sweet, industrious and loyal. In return for these qualities, he will shelter her, love her and grow old with her. With Nel, Jude can position himself as the head of a household, something he needs to comfort his ego. These thoughts lead Jude to "[seeing] himself taking shape in [Nel's] eyes" (83). But even this desire will amount to nothing. Jude will become dissatisfied in his marriage to her and will make an exit, leaving Nel as the head of home and matriarch figure. The cycle repeats itself.

In *Sula*, Eva's burning of Plum can be viewed as a mother castrating her son. Eva fears that in his drug addiction, Plum is returning to her womb. Eva makes the decision to set him on fire and burn him to death. In killing him, Eva denies Plum the right to make his own decisions. In dismantling her adult son's right to choices and decisions, she infantilises him. However, Plum can be viewed as infantilising himself in his own drug addiction. In his state of being high on drugs, he makes himself a child, unable to care for himself or make clear decisions about his future. Black men are suppressed repeatedly through infantilisation as imposed on them by others, or by self-sabotaging due to broken identity, as evident in Plum.

An interesting play on infantilisation can be seen throughout *Beloved*, particularly in the naming of men "boys" and adult women "gals". Morrison makes reference to the slaves on the Sweet Home Plantation being referred to as "men". Mr Garner maintains their identity as men for the duration of his rule on the plantation. The five Sweet Home men are described as so starved of the absence of women that they had taken to calves. When Sethe arrives on the plantation as a thirteen-year-old girl, they allow her to choose which man she wants. They dream of raping her, yet restrain themselves, and this restraint is attributed to the fact that they are Sweet Home *men* – as named by Mr Garner. This instillation of name and identity allows the slaves to live up to their title as men. Remer argues that the corruption of morals and contamination is shown in the naming of slaves "boys" rather than "men" (s.d.:2). Mr Garner is one of few slave-owners who chooses to call his slaves men:

> "Y'all got boys," he told them. "Young boys, old boys, picky boys, stroppin boys. Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one." "Beg to differ, Garner. Ain't no nigger men." "Not if you scared, they ain't." Garner's smile was wide. "But if you a man yourself, you'll want your niggers to be men too." "I wouldn't have no nigger men round my wife." It was the reaction Garner loved and waited for. "Neither would I," he said. "Neither would I." (Morrison, 2011:12)

This is a conversation that frequently leads Mr Garner into verbal and physical altercations. It is the mind-set that "ain't no nigger men" that breaks the identity of Black slave men down. "The other slaveowners call their slaves 'boys' to infantilize and dehumanize them; they do so to help themselves forget that their slaves are 'men,' fellow human beings capable of the same hopes, dreams, and goals as they are" (Remer, s.d.:2). Thus, by calling slaves "boys", slave-owners position their slaves on a lower footing, making them unequal in value, hopes and desires. Mr Garner, however, appears not to be afraid to refer to his slaves as men in front of other slave-owners. In fact, he enjoys getting a response when he says that "if they were real men themselves, they would want their niggers to be men too". Mr Garner insults the people he is conversing with by pointing out that he would not want "nigger men around his wife". In this, he could be saying that he trusts his Black slaves more than he trusts his white neighbour, or stranger or peddler or brother-in-law. It seems that he is calling white men "niggers" and verbalising his higher trust and appreciation in his slave men.

Paul D is perplexed by his crowning as "man" and regularly contemplates his identity because of it:

> He grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to – but they didn't want to since nothing important to them could be put down on paper. (Morrison, 2011:147)

Paul D learns that although they are defined as men on the Sweet Home Plantation, this definition does not extend to the outside world. It is Schoolteacher who arrives on the Plantation to restore the "order" of slave and master. Schoolteacher teaches the men that they are nothing more than "watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke" (148).

From this experience, Paul D learns quickly that "definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined" (225). He has very little say over his identity and the shaping of his life. He wonders if Mr Garner's referring to them as men is because he was naming what he saw or trying to create what he did not (260). Paul D questions whether a white man's saying it makes it so, and considers what would happen if Garner woke up one morning and changed his mind and took the word away (260). Here, Morrison depicts the frailty of words. This frailty of words can be seen from the perspective of Black slaves brought from Africa and denied the right to language. They were no longer allowed to speak in their native tongue and were forced to learn their master's tongue quickly. This isolated Black slaves from language, thus allowing "definitions to belong to the definers and not the defined" (225). These men are then seen as clinging to the words placed over them, unable to take that authority of words and naming into their own grasp. Paul D realises that if Mr Garner had woken up one morning and changed his mind, the Sweet Home men would have been disrobed of their title as men instantly. This reveals the little influence Paul D holds in his own world.

Along with the emasculation of slave men through words, language and naming, slaves brought from Africa had to be broken into bondage. Discipline, inferiority, helplessness, fear and obedience were established (Stampp, 1978:144-147). This belittling of slave men dismantled their manhood and positioned them as children in the eyes of slave-owners, needing to be taught and guided:

> Ideally it was the relationship of a parent and child. The slave who had most completely lost his manhood, who had lost confidence in himself, who stood before his master with hat in

> hand, head slightly bent, was the one best suited to receive the favors and affection of a patriarch. The system was in its essence a process of infantilization – and the master used the most perfect products of the system to prove that Negroes were a childlike race, needing guidance and protection but inviting paternal love as well. (327)

A parent/child relationship between master and slave began to emerge and through this hierarchy, slave men were not trusted in their strengths, decisions or capabilities.

Paternal Masters

While Mr Garner refers to his slaves as "men", it is necessary to notice that he simultaneously calls them niggers. To him, his *niggers* are men. In one sentence he both belittles and uplifts his slaves. This contradiction can be attributed to the paternalism that developed in the relationship between masters and their slaves. Stampp claims that "planters sometimes developed a patriarchal attitude toward their 'people' and took pride in treating them indulgently" (76). Morgan imparts that paternalism can be perceived as an owner/pet relationship between the slave-owner and slave. The paternal relationship that masters developed had little to do with kindness and good cheer, but rather, was used to discipline and morally justify a system of exploitation (1985:123). Morgan describes the conflict of paternalism:

> It seems that since the slave holders placed themselves in a paternal role, they were able to perceive themselves as paternalistic. They in turn allowed this identification to become a catch-all for all attitudes and behaviors in dealing with their slaves. Furthermore, it seems that since slaves had to depend on their masters for every necessity, the masters assumed that the slaves were happy in their slave status. It would also appear that the slave holders would not allow themselves to prove the reasons for the slaves' seeming acquiescence to slavery. (129)

While some slave-owners may have developed affectionate feelings towards their slaves, severe whippings under the pretence of discipline may very well have caused their slaves to adopt a childlike and docile countenance. Slave identity and behaviour had to be altered to match what their master expected of them, in order to avoid a beating.

Morrison frequently portrays a kind-hearted slave-owner in her novels. Kolchin notes regarding paternalism:

> Slave-owner paternalism involved not a good, painless, or benign slavery […] but a slavery in which masters took personal interest in the lives of their slaves. The typical Southern slave owner knew his or her slaves by name and interacted with them on a frequent basis. (1993:111)

In *A Mercy*, Morrison shows Jacob Vaark as a good man who does not see flesh as a commodity. He does not want to participate in the buying and selling of slaves. However, like Garner uplifting and belittling his slaves by calling them men and niggers in the same sentence, Vaark likewise does not fully discern the value of Black lives. He takes Florens home as a substitute or pet for his wife after they had recently lost a daughter of the same age. Vaark suggests that if Florens is kicked in the head and killed by a mare like their daughter, the loss would not rock them as much.

While Vaark is kind, he too holds a paternalistic stance towards his slaves. He develops a close, paternal relationship with Lina. Although Jacob Vaark does not view flesh as a commodity, he still has slaves to help him work his land, and forms a team with Lina before his wife, Rebekka, arrives:

> Together they minded the fowl and starter stock; planted corn and vegetables. But it was she who taught him how to dry the fish they caught; to anticipate spawning and how to protect a crop from night creatures. Yet neither of them knew what to do about fourteen days of rain or fifty-five days of none. They were helpless when black flies descended in scarves, disabling cattle, the horse, and forcing them to take refuge indoors. (Morrison, 2009:47)

The two work side by side happily developing a friendship, and we get the sense that they enjoy each other's company. However, the reality is that Lina is still a slave in the eyes of Vaark, and is therefore forced to sleep outside regardless of the weather. Masters may have developed paternalism towards their slaves, but this paternalism is a bad representation of fatherhood. A child born into slavery grows up observing that male figures are overseer, driver or master (Morgan, 1985:140). The child's expectation and experience from these three male figures is not fatherly or a good representation thereof, but rather breaks him down and causes fear. He learns that he is to obey and that he is nothing more than property, bought for economic growth. Within the family unit, slave fathers do not have the resources or competence to fully father their children, and are therefore unable to present an accurate display of what it means to be father and fathered. Fatherhood is dismantled almost entirely

with paternal masters as the only example to observe. Fatherhood becomes a misunderstood term.

The Father Gap

While masters adopted feelings of paternalism towards their slaves, a sense of fatherlessness persisted within slave families. Doreen Fowler, in her article "'Nobody Could Make it Alone': Fathers and Boundaries in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", remarks:

> Schoolteacher represents a class of white slaveholders who refused to recognize biological black fathers; they claimed to own black children as their own property, thus erasing the father/child relationship and substituting the master/slave relationship. (2011:17)

The absence of the father as a result of slavery can be attributed to the ruptured family unit, but also to emotional guarding that both men and women exercised. Paul D is alarmed by Sethe's "thick" love for her children and recognises it as a dangerous display of her heart. He contemplates the following:

> Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one.
>
> […] You protected yourself and loved small. Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own [….] Grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants. Anything bigger wouldn't do. A woman, a child, a brother – a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia. (Morrison, 2011:54 & 191)

Paul D, like Baby Suggs, has learned to create an emotional detachment from loved ones, especially family members, if he is to guard his heart from emotional trauma. Paul D may have had children that are simply not mentioned because of his emotional detachment and guarding. Paul D has learned that at some point, a loved one is going to be sold or killed. Historically, such emotional guarding created a ruptured family image of seemingly uncaring parents who wanted nothing to do with the upbringing of their children.

The difference, however, in the emotional detachment that both male and female slaves adopted can be found in Sethe's "thick love" and Paul D's "thin love". Paul D is horrified to

hear that Sethe slit her daughter's throat. This action does not correspond with the Sethe that he remembers from the Sweet Home Plantation. Sethe describes her love as thick and tells Paul D that "thin love ain't love at all" (194). While under the institution of slavery, labels of father and mother are made extensively difficult to celebrate. Once outside the confines of slavery, Morrison's mother characters are free to fully engage that role, while the fathers largely remain absent, separated by death or having been sold. It is the discovery of Sethe's "thick love" that unsettles Paul D so much that he is prompted to plan his exit out of her life:

> He did not put his hat on right away. First he fingered it, deciding how his going would be, how to make it an exit not an escape. And it was very important not to leave without looking. He stood up, turned and looked up the white stairs [….] [H]e opened [the door] before asking Sethe to put supper aside for him because he might be a little late getting back. (195)

While Paul D's exit from Sethe's life is painful, it does not truly surprise her. She has become accustomed to the many exits of men in her life and has adapted to her role as matriarch and head of home. Sethe has an expectation of fatherlessness. We know this from a previous encounter she has with him. Paul D approaches her on her walk home from work to confess to her that he has been having sexual relations with Beloved. He tells Sethe: "you won't like what I'm about to say", and Sethe immediately expects that he is about to tell her that he is leaving. She expects the men in her life to come and go. She prepares to "accept, release or excuse" Paul D, even though this is not what he wants to tell her. Paul D, instead of confessing his affair with Beloved, says that he wants Sethe pregnant, "and suddenly it was a solution: a way to hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of [Beloved's] spell – all in one" (151). The idea to have a baby with Sethe allows Paul D the opportunity to claim territory as well as identity. It would "document his manhood", something that he has had difficulty coming to terms with since Mr Garner died and Schoolteacher took over. Having a child to carry his name would, in his mind, secure Paul D's identity. It is apparent that for Paul D, his struggle and most crucial desire is to have a rooted identity and to truly be known as a man. His masculinity now depends upon his unborn child.

Sethe is concerned about this request and reflects on the fact that the three of them, Sethe, Denver and Beloved, are "a family somehow and [Paul D] is not the head of it" (155). Denver does not see their family in the same light, however. She recognises that Paul D and Sethe share something that she is excluded from. She hears them talking about Halle, her

father. Here we see that what was once Denver's pain alone becomes pain that affects multiple lives:

> They were a twosome, saying "Your daddy" and "Sweet Home" in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her. That her own father's absence was not hers. Once the absence had belonged to Grandma Baby – a son, deeply mourned because he was the one who had bought her out of there. Then it was her mother's absent husband. Now it was this hazelnut stranger's absent friend. Only those who knew him ("knew him well") could claim his absence for themselves. (15)

This passage shows the damage of an absent father figure. Denver is isolated in her pain because she never knew her father at all, unlike this "hazelnut stranger" who apparently knew him well. Slavery causes a mother to lose her son, a woman to lose her husband, a daughter to lose her father and a man to lose his friend. The expanse of destruction ripples into various relationship dynamics. It is not a nameless slave who is lost, but a son, a husband, a father and a friend.

To Baby Suggs, "a man ain't nothing but a man. But a son? Well now, that's *somebody*" (27). She treasures Halle because he is the one child she is allowed to keep. After years of sexual assault, being treated as a slave breeder, Baby Suggs has eight children with six different men. She learns quickly that her children are viewed as pieces in a game of chequers, being moved around, sold and killed carelessly. She vows to restrain her love for her children as a method of guarding herself. Baby Suggs views Halle as deeply valued: "'God take what He would,' she said. And He did, and He did, and He did and then gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn't mean a thing" (28). Halle is the son who buys Baby Suggs's freedom, and Halle is the same son who marries Sethe and fathers four of her children. Baby Suggs recognises Sethe's privilege in having had *one* man father all of her children, even though he is now an absent father-figure.

Sethe never fully comes to terms with Halle's absence. In a conversation with Paul D, he provides some missing pieces as to what occurred when they escaped Sweet Home and lost each other:

> [Paul D:] "What Halle ever do to you? Halle stood by you. He never left you." [Sethe:] "What'd he leave then if not me?" "I don't know, but it wasn't you. That's a fact." "Then he did worse; he left his children." (81)

It is at this moment that Sethe learns from Paul D that what devastated Halle was seeing Sethe assaulted by Schoolteacher and his nephews. Sethe is angered by this news, interpreting it as a passive husband who watched and allowed the assault to happen. But Paul D reasons:

> "Hey! Hey! Listen up. Let me tell you something. A man ain't a goddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can't chop down because they're inside." (81)

This provides perspective as to Halle's rationalising: seeing his wife assaulted devastated him so severely that he could see no way to move forward into a future of freedom. Seeing his wife held down by white men who rob her of her breastmilk while he watches, helpless and unable to protect and defend the woman he is meant to take care of, emasculates him. He cannot think of a way that they would ever be able to heal and move past such trauma. The only way, for Halle, is out. Stampp describes the debilitated position of slave men:

> The husband was not the director of an agricultural enterprise; he was not the head of the family, the holder of property, the provider, or the protector. If his wife or child was disrobed and whipped by master or overseer, he stood by in helpless humiliation. In an age of patriarchal families, the male slave's only crucial function within the family was that of siring offspring. (1978:343)

The novels under scrutiny are littered with fathers and husbands who abandon their families and responsibilities, either voluntarily, being unable to handle the pressures of a haunting violent past, or involuntarily owing to being sold. But we can sympathise with this abandonment. George Rawick states that the absence of functioning male figures in contemporary Black households can be traced back to the weakening of the Black family, through for example, the lessening of the authority of the father from within the confines of slavery (1972:92). *A Mercy* portrays a list of characters who are fatherless. Florens's father is unknown, as confirmed by Minha Mãe. She is raped to be "broken in" for breeding purposes and therefore cannot identify the father of Florens:

> I don't know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed. Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood.

> They said they were told to break we in. There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. (Morrison, 2009:161)

Minha Mãe is used to grow the slave population. The multiple rapes she endures result in her bearing two children whose fathers she cannot identify. I can only imagine that the men sent to break these women in found little pleasure in the action they were required to carry out. These were other men's wives, and their relationships and family dynamics were constantly being stunted by such exploitation. Because of Minha Mãe's rape, Florens goes through her life without a father figure. Sorrow likewise is a character who remains fatherless. She is pregnant twice and both times the father is unnamed, most certainly unknown.

In *Sula*, we are briefly introduced to Eva's husband, BoyBoy:

> After five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage BoyBoy took off. During the time they were together he was very much preoccupied with other women and not home much. He did whatever he could that he liked and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third. (Morrison, 1998:32)

BoyBoy leaves Eva with $1.65, five eggs, three beets and three children to feed. When Plum is three years old, BoyBoy returns. He dances up the stairs and sweeps off his hat. His attitude is nonchalant. He does not enquire about his children nor does he wish to see them. He has what seems to be a pleasant and polite conversation with Eva but it is unclear as to the purpose of his visit. Just as soon as BoyBoy is reintroduced into the novel, he makes a swift exit and we forget about him.

Likewise, Hannah and Sula are left without a husband and father. Upon Rekus's death, Hannah moves herself and her young daughter into Eva's house, where Hannah begins to establish her identity in sexual relationships with various men. Hannah's steady sequence of lovers consists mostly of the husbands of her friends and neighbours. While slave breeding and the breaking in of slave women were brutal assignments allocated to slave men, Hannah's sexual promiscuity with various men in her neighbourhood alludes to ideas of masculinity whereby sexual chastity and marital fidelity are rejected seemingly without any regard. This sexual promiscuity without forethought contradicts the brutality and discomfort of the rape of slave women by male slaves. This behaviour is observed and learned by Sula, who follows in her mother's footsteps when she is older. Sula and Nel grow up to enjoy the

attention of men. This desire for masculine attention could be attributed to the father gap these young girls have grown up with.

Of all the men that enter and exit in the three novels, Paul D appears to be one of the few men who attempts to remain in a woman's life, eager to take on family responsibilities. He enters 124 Bluestone Road and appears to have an emotional effect on women. He makes women weep and tell him personal stories of vulnerability. For Sethe, she feels that "the responsibility for her breasts, at last, [is] in somebody else's hands" (Morrison, 2011:21). What was the responsibility for Sethe's breasts? Perhaps it was her role of mother, wife and sole provider. Perhaps it was the responsibility for the trauma she needed to work through after having been assaulted, her breastmilk stolen from her. Paul D taking responsibility for her breasts makes him head of the house, father and husband, and relieves Sethe. This is a man who can relate to Sethe on many levels, having experienced a similar trauma at the Sweet Home Plantation.

While there are extensive references to absent fathers in Morrison's novels, little attention is given to the male characters who contrarily choose to father. *A Mercy*'s Blacksmith is a man who chooses to father a child who is not his own. This is a remarkable change of representation for her male characters. Malaik is an orphaned young boy who is adopted by the Blacksmith. Florens's jealousy for the Blacksmith's love causes her to believe that he has chosen the young boy over her. She responds in violence to the Blacksmith and it appears that he is being punished for choosing to father. The Blacksmith's choice to father a child who is not his own displays a sensitivity and a desire to nurture. These "feminine" characteristics are so foreign and unnatural to Florens that she lashes out at the Blacksmith. The Blacksmith's "feminine" characteristics can be likened to Shadrack's display of femininity in his suffering from shell-shock. Through both of these male characters, Morrison breaks down the many stereotypes that are enforced upon men and women. Maternal instinct is shown to flow and cross over into either gender.

In conclusion, the history of slavery provides an adequate explanation as to the culture of absent fathers in contemporary Western society. Fathers are portrayed as emasculated, infantilised and metaphorically castrated on the grounds of race. When a character does choose to father, he is depicted as abnormal and feminine, and is criticised for it. Morrison's male characters are shown to be rejected and ostracised from a community that they are part of. They are represented as having no real place anywhere, not even in their own homes,

where females are strong and leaders of households, and who seem to encompass both male and female, mother and father, roles. Morrison's illustration of absent fathers, husbands, brothers and sons represents a submissive role that Black men have seemingly accepted in society.

Conclusion

> [I]t is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us or imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves [….] We are subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience [….] We are not, in fact, "other". (Morrison, 1988:208)

The focus of this dissertation has been to analyse themes of identity, naming, mothering violence and absent fathers from within the umbrella of slavery in selected Toni Morrison texts. Each novel represents slavery variously and has been analysed through intersectional theoretical lenses such as womanism and motherhood. Within slave narrative, I have explored identity and the damage inflicted as the aftermath of slavery. Jill Matus observes in *Toni Morrison: Contemporary World Writers* that Morrison resists any monolithic categorisation of Black identity and writes from historical specificity (1998:3). Morrison's consciousness of Black culture resonates in the context of the civil rights and Black cultural nationalist movements in the 1950s and 1960s (8). Through her emphasis on memory, Morrison reveals an abiding interest in the "presentness" of the past and the ways in which collective memory can become a powerful cultural authority (17). History is never over without knowledge of that history; the present can be only poorly understood (18).

Slave Narrative

As slave narrative, *Beloved*, *Sula* and *A Mercy* show that Morrison urges her readers to remember and acknowledge past traumas of enslavement and the effect that it had on the identity of African American people as a whole. Rebecca Ferguson notes that many African American novelists place memory at the forefront of their writing because the past had been written for them and can no longer be romanticised (2007:129). Morrison uses slave narrative as a way in which to remember past traumas, but also to free the Black community from past enslavement. In doing so, she takes a history of enslavement and writes about it truthfully from the perspective of a Black woman. Her novels are absolutely not romanticised. Jennifer Fleischner points out that narrative is liberating, while silence is repressive and enslaving (1996 [1994]:5). Morrison gives power back to the Black voice on a topic that has seemingly been predominantly spoken about in such a way that the evils are justified by white narrative voice. Fleischner notes:

> Embedded in the slave narrators' insistence that the stories they tell about their slavery pasts are *true* is their complete understanding that the violent theft of *their* memories – of their own selves and of themselves by others – lay at the sick heart of slavery. When by way of their narratives they cross over the threshold of visibility into cultural memory, they effectively steal themselves back […] but they nonetheless carry the internalized burdens of their individual experiences of slavery for years. (3)

While Morrison herself did not experience directly the damaging effects of slavery, she did grow up in an environment that used storytelling as the manner in which to relate a harrowing past. She thus understands the internalised experience of slavery, and allows for slave trauma to be spoken about and acknowledged in the space of fictional slave narrative. At the end of *Beloved* the line "This is not a story to pass on" (Morrison, 2011:324) is constantly repeated, calling the reader both to remember the story of enslavement but also never to repeat it. The internalised burdens that slaves carry and pass on for years cannot be ignored and they cannot be erased. Through writing about the dark past of slavery from within a contemporary Western context, Morrison is appealing to the white community to detach themselves from their disposition of passivity and to become active in the healing and reconciliation of the Black community. Furthermore, Morrison's use of slave narrative, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Charles Davis, represents the attempts of Black people to write themselves into being (1985:xxiii), in order to promote psychological and social liberation.

Slavery

The issues of slavery and identity that have been the focus of this study are remarkably difficult to separate because of their interlinking dependencies. Slavery was the reason for a dismantled identity, and as long as slavery is a present influence, identity cannot thrive as steadfast and enduring. Ferguson notes that slavery is more than an ideology or an economy, but that it represents a pathology, the effects of which are still with contemporary inhabitants of America (2007:133). She further claims: "It is transhistorical in the sense that its enduring presence, and its impact on black people, persists far beyond the historical era of slavery" (133). This is evident in *Sula*. Although set in a time period outside of slavery, the characters are shown to desire self-actualisation and stable identities as the main goal to which they aspire. Sula is criticised for her desire to "make herself", while at the same time, the novel leaves the reader with dissatisfaction that other characters do not pursue self-actualisation. The novel depicts a group of people suffering a broken identity, using Sula as the standard to commemorate.

Matus notes that *Beloved* was "born from [Morrison's] recognition that traditional slave narratives always 'drew a veil' over the shocking and painful incidents of their pasts" (1998:104). *Beloved* thus represents Morrison's attempts to reconstruct the "disremembered" past of the race (Ferguson, 2007:134). This "drawn veil" is torn in Morrison's retelling of stories based on historical fact. The horrors of slavery and the expanse of its destruction are exhumed and critiqued. The reconstructing of a 'disremembered' past is vital, as this history has been both mis-told (by whites) and repressed (by Blacks).

> Beloved embodies the whole traumatic experience of slavery and the "absent presence" of the forgotten dead, she not only knows more than she could otherwise have known in her previous short life, but she also manifests the effects of slavery had, its profound fragmentation of the self and of the connections which might be formed with others. (144)

Fragmentation of the self and a dislocated people, as a result of the evils of slavery, are evident throughout the three texts. Slavery can be seen as the root or the cause of identity dismemberment, resulting in the absence of figures essential to identity development. These absent figures extend beyond fathers. Ferguson expresses this fragmentation aptly:

> The melting away of both body and self – a disappearance that is more and worse than death – is experienced by Denver as the accumulation of all the losses she has sustained, death and leaving and dissolution understood in terms of one another. (145)

Here, Ferguson draws attention to the self that Denver experiences as melting away when Beloved goes missing for a brief moment. Denver is a character portrayed as struggling through the many losses she has had to come to terms with as a result of slavery, even though she herself was never physically enslaved. Her enslavement is internalised as a form of mental enslavement because it has been retold to her by Sethe and because she is suffering from the aftermath of a destructive institution. Denver has lost a father, two brothers, a sister and a mother. Her mother is lost in the sense that upon discovering that she killed Beloved, Denver could no longer trust her mother as an emotionally and physically safe place in which to rest and confide. The bond between mother and daughter is severely interrupted, as seen in *Sula* between both Nel and Sula and their mothers, as well as in *A Mercy* with Florens and her mother.

Family

Anxiety about expected familial disruption can be seen throughout Morrison's texts. Fleischner explains this anxiety as evident throughout slave narrative:

> Events that are considered traumatic because, in part, they are exceptional and come as a shock, were for the slave the norm. Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as well as family loss were common occurrences, and accounts about particular instances and the pain and anxiety they caused fill the pages of their narratives. Indeed, anticipatory anxiety about separation and disruption permeates the narratives. (1996:29)

We are confronted constantly with disrupted family units in the form of absent fathers, ghosts, abandoned and departed children, and missing mothers[5]. As Baby Suggs says in *Beloved*: "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (Morrison, 2011:6). Grief, pain and loss are experienced across the Black community. Fleischner further describes the disrupted family:

> Slavery's disruption of the nuclear slave family created familial groups that were generally in flux, as family members died, were sold, or ran away and others in the slave community […] became surrogates for those who were lost. Husbands and wives who were separated and never expected to see one another again sometimes remarried, occasionally with complicated and confusing results. Slave narratives attest to the ongoing and profound longing felt by the narrators for lost parents, siblings, spouses, and children.
>
> Calling the plantation household a "family" served rhetorically to sentimentalize and naturalize slavery as a structure of relations based on domination and dependence. (1996:29 & 31)

Intertwined in Morrison's writing is the severely disrupted family structure and the anxiety that comes with expecting it to occur. Family structures are challenged with fathers missing and mothers single-handedly running the household, raising children and being the sole breadwinners. In an interview with Rosemarie Lester, Morrison observes Black women's historical relations with their male counterparts:

[5] Mothers are missing not simply in the sense of abandonment and separation from their children through being sold or killed, but also missing in the sense that the idealised picture of mother as nurturer and gentle carer is missing from Morrison's texts.

> We think of slave women as women in the house, but they were not, most of them worked in the fields along with the men. They were required to do physical labor in competition with them, so that their relations with each other turned out to be more comradeship than male dominance / female subordination. When they were in the field plowing or collecting cotton or doing whatever, the owner of the slaves didn't care whether they were women or men [….] So I have noticed among a certain generation of black men and women – older black men and women – the relationship is more one of comradeship than the you-do-this-and-I-do-this; and it's not very separate. (1988:49)

Throughout the texts, a combination of equality between Black men and women has been illustrated due to slavery, yet at the same time, Morrison has shown her female characters to be the ones carrying the majority of the workload within the family. This challenge to gender roles, caused by slavery, has resulted in a new foundation for identity development within the Black community, as depicted by Morrison.

Identity

As mentioned earlier, one of the main foci throughout this dissertation has been to analyse the ways in which identity is both broken and shaped from within the confines of enslavement. Morrison shows through her characters the struggle to claim ownership over oneself once freed from slavery. Violent mothers and absent fathers are a phenomenon somewhat anticipated because of the history of slavery. From enslavement comes a dismembered identity: from gender roles to family units and ownership through naming. Naming has been evident in its role throughout the texts in the building of identities, concealing evils and claiming ownership of property and self.

According to Freischner, "abusers require a conspiracy of silence, both to enforce their rule and to protect their name" (1996:2). This is evident in *Beloved* with the nameless abuser "Schoolteacher" as slave-owner. Because he is nameless, he cannot be held accountable for his actions. A play on names has been shown to be prominent throughout all three of the texts. Misnaming, renaming, under-naming and over-naming are constantly exhibited through characters and places. Ferguson notes that the definition of the Bottom "depends upon an ironic inversion that hinges on 'point of view'" (2007:56). The themes of "point of view" and "watching" as illustrated in *Sula* show both the importance of naming as a way in which to define one's self and space, as well as the fact that the white community is passive in terms of the struggles and hardships of the Black community. The Bottom, which is spatially situated at the top, depicts a distortion in naming and authority. Authority lies with the white

community, who are able to name the top of a hill the "Bottom" and have that name accepted and believed. Ferguson further observes that the naming of the top and the Bottom symbolises the hierarchy of "above" and "below" and thus the separation between Black and white (57). Morrison's play on names illustrates her concern with the multi-faceted identity of African Americans and the interface of Black and white America (11).

Ferguson notes that identity is an elusive term in the context of Black American culture due to its dislocations and history of destabilising social and psychological experiences (14). According to Ferguson, Morrison's writing shows characters who are "shaped by their awareness of the traumatic impact of slavery and the damaging heritage of the racial divisions persisting within America" (15). "Without the awareness and interactive presence of a community, individuals are seen to have at best an insecure sense of their own place and meaning" (17). Thus slavery is shown to be a key player in the breaking and reshaping of identity by defining place and space to slaves. The work of discovering and rebuilding this broken identity can be found in writing about the past.

In an interview with Christina Davis, Morrison expressed the importance of writing about the history of slavery and its close bond with identity:

> The reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can't really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it. There is a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of the black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours [….] You have to stake out and identify those who have preceded you – resummoning them, acknowledging them is just one step in the process of reclamation – so that they are always there as the *confirmation* and the affirmation of the life that I personally have not lived but is the life of that organism to which I belong which is black people in this country. (1994 [1988]:224-225)

The shaken identity of Black Americans is shown to be rebuilt in concert with each other. A whole new culture and identity is formed through accepting the past and reclaiming a history, however painful it may be.

Absent Fathers

Along with issues of identity, the theme of absent fathers or missing presences has been a recurring theme in this investigation. Matus observes that the drowning of Chicken Little in

Sula is a symbol of lack or loss (1998:63). This lack or loss persists into various aspects of Black identity. It is the loss of stable identity, community, family, father figures and family members. *Beloved*, *Sula* and *A Mercy* represent a noticeable lack and loss. Patricia McKee, in her article "Spacing and Placing Experience in Toni Morrison's *Sula*", confirms this opinion by saying that the experience of missing in *Sula* is a particular historical experience (1997 [1994]:38). Particular things and people are missing, or parts of a person, such as Eva's missing leg. McKee observes that Morrison places both missed presences and missed absences in *Sula* (39). I believe that these missed absences represent father figures and the masculine figures within various households. They are missed in that Morrison's male characters do not carry foreground roles, but rather act in background positions and quickly abscond from the scene. In addition, they form a lacuna because very little study has focussed on absent fathers. In Morrison's writing, particularly in the three novels under scrutiny, fathers are characters whose presences appear to be missed within the novels as well as missed in academic study. They remain unnoticed, missed presences.

In *Beloved*, Rafael Pérez-Torres observes, absence informs several levels of the narration:

> The reader is told numerous times that Beloved's story "is not a story to pass on." "Pass on" signifies both rejection and acceptance. Beloved's story cannot be repeated, the narrative warns, cannot be allowed to occur again in the world. The repeated warning also means that this is a story that cannot be forgotten, that cannot be rejected or "passed" on. (1997 [1993]:93)

This "passing" on in both forgetting and remembering, alludes to the absence of fathers and inheritance throughout the three novels. Family units are so disrupted by the evils of slavery that they result in a stunting of inheritance from fathers to their children, inheritance of family name as well as inheritance of a steadfast identity. The story should not be passed on because it should not be forgotten or repeated; however, this very story has no fathers present to pass it on at all. While this project has explored missing experience, I found that there was scant discussion about the effects of the absence of fathers throughout Morrison's texts. I hope that over time this theme will be more readily and deeply analysed.

Applicability to the South African Context

Throughout my study on American slavery and the effect it had on African American identity, I was struck by the commonalities the discourse had with the South African history of apartheid. Both institutions have had crippling effects on identity and both have *Sula*'s

peculiar hierarchy of top and bottom and separation of Black and white communities. These two institutions display infantilisation in the form of calling men "boys" and women "girls". Within the apartheid regime, Black South African families experienced the effects of absent husbands and fathers as a result of the migrant labour system, sending men far from home in search of employment. Furthermore, families were dismantled, with fathers absent from their homes due to extended periods of frequent and unnecessary imprisonment. Just as Ferguson noted that the effects of slavery "are with [American citizens] still" (2007:133), the same can be said for South Africans regarding the damaging effects of apartheid. Although harmonious cohabitation has to some extent been achieved and tolerance of different races exercised among South African people, passivity in the face in injustice still creates a gap between the Black and white worlds.

Savo Heleta's article "Decolonisation of Higher Education: Dismantling Epistemic Violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa" highlights the aims of the decolonisation student movement, as described by Suellen Shay, to end domination by "white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European worldviews" (Shay, 2016:np). The campaign to decolonise South African universities is a pressing issue in South Africa currently because higher education remains a stumbling block in the emancipation of Black South Africans (Heleta, 2016:1). Although political freedom has been achieved, the colonial / apartheid system of education, which worked to anchor power and privilege of the white minority, remains. This system worked to under-qualify the Black population, while maintaining the social political and economic features of the status quo (3). Without striving towards a decolonised higher educational system, emancipation of many Black South Africans cannot fully be reached. James Baldwin makes a sobering statement regarding freedom from the burden of enslavement:

> And in exactly the same way that the South imagines that it "knows" the Negro, the North imagines that it has set him free. Both camps are deluded. Human freedom is a complex, difficult – and private – thing. If we can liken life, for a moment, to a furnace, then freedom is the fire which burns away illusion. (1959:np)

This highlights the unfortunate truth that white patriarchy is the dominant narrative voice in contemporary society. The colonised higher education of South Africa erases the history of the subordinate, by teaching history from a one-sided view that seeks both to justify and cover an evil past. This Eurocentric epistemic canon is disconnected from the experiences

and realities of Africans. Instead, it enforces the belief that the Western world is a source of knowledge and unquestionable truth (Heleta, 2016:4). As a result of this dominant white narrative voice, as evident in higher education, Black South Africans feel the need to distance, reject and resist European or Western dominance and privilege that is "full of stereotypes, prejudices and patronising views about Africa and its people" (1). Similarly to African Americans' struggle in recovering from their history of slavery, so too is it evident that in South Africa, although two decades post-apartheid, racial inequalities and wealth disparities are still largely evident as a result of a damaging history. Disruption of "whiteness" therefore, is the goal in South African society, according to Ziauddin Sardar, whom Heleta cites as claiming that this "whiteness" has been "imposed since colonial times as a 'symbol of purity' and has defined 'what it means to be civilised, modern and human'" (1).

The colonised system of higher education is explained as having its roots in colonial and imperial occupants' belief in their superiority to civilise "uncivilised" people. Furthermore, colonists believed in their paternal duty to provide guidance to the "childlike" peoples in the colonies (2). These racist sentiments have resulted in Africa being stereotyped as "dark" and "uncivilised', with African inhabitants believed to be incapable of intellectual contribution. This paternalistic attitude is remarkably similar to that found in the justification of American slavery.

Eurocentric standards and values still dominate the higher education curriculum, and this prevents an honest critical interrogation of slavery, patriarchy, imperialism, capitalism and white supremacy (3). This naturalised, biased way of encouraging African students to perceive the world encourages them to "blindly follow the 'enlightened' colonisers, learn from them […] and fit into the periphery of their world as second-class citizens" (4). It is argued that Europe cannot be the centre of the universe at African universities (5), forcing Black students to adopt colonial worldviews.

Finally, Heleta makes note of the "wilful blindness" of many wealthy groups to the struggles of the marginalised. This blind eye can be closely tied to the representation of watching and observing without acting out in *Sula*. Morrison illustrates through Chicken Little's death the passivity and blind eye of the white community. Too often, a blind eye is turned to injustice and exploitation. Ursula Le Guin remarks about recognising and acting on injustices:

> The shift from denial of injustice to recognition of injustice can't be unmade. What your eyes have seen they have seen. Once you see the injustice, you can never again in good faith deny the oppression and defend the oppressor. What was loyalty is now betrayal. From now on, if you don't resist, you collude. But there is a middle ground between defense and attack, a ground of flexible resistance, a space opened for change. It is not an easy place to find or live in. (2004:216)

Change is possible if oppression is not tolerated in any community. Those who turn a blind eye or remain passive to oppressive behaviour are not supporting the oppressed, but rather the oppressor. Matus cites Morrison's self-reflection on *Sula*, in which she notes that she is interested in the way Black communities tolerate evil, learning to live and survive in its presence rather than responding anxiously and aggressively to exorcise or banish it (1998:61). As earlier mentioned by Morrison, "while you can't really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it" (1994:224) encourages Black individuals to rewrite their history in such a way that they are heard. Studying texts such as Morrison's assists in giving prominence to Black voices and historical and contemporary experiences that have certain consonances with specifically South African experiences.

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