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## **“Your love is too thick”: An Analysis of Black Motherhood in Slave Narratives, Neo-Slave Narratives, and Our Contemporary Moment**

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“Your love is too thick”: An Analysis of Black Motherhood in Slave Narratives, Neo-Slave Narratives, and Our Contemporary Moment

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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in  
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American Literature

by

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## Abstract

In this paper, Kait Spong examines alternative practices of mothering that are strategic nature, heavily analyzing Patricia Hill Collins' concepts of "othermothering" and "preservative love" as applied to Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved* and Harriet Jacob's 1861 slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Using literary analysis as a vehicle, Spong then applies these West African notions of motherhood to a modern context by evaluating contemporary social movements such as Black Lives Matter where black mothers have played a prominent role in making public statements against systemic issues such as police brutality, heightened surveillance, and the prison industrial complex.

Toni Morrison; Harriet Jacobs; American slavery; black feminism; motherhood; police brutality; Black Lives Matter

## **Introduction to Alternative Mothering Practices**

In her 2011 article, “Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy*,” Amanda Putnam asserts Morrison’s characters are “scarred—physically and/or emotionally—by the oppressive environments around them.” They are also “racially exploited, sexually violated, and often emotionally humiliated” and “learn to coexist with their visible and invisible scars by making choices that are not easily understood” (25). Putnam’s theory of black women “making choices that are not easily understood” due to emotional trauma, sexual violation, and structural oppression applies to the black female experience during slavery, post-slavery (Emancipation, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements), and in our current cultural moment.

According to scholar Angela Davis’s theory of “triple jeopardy,” black women suffer from limited autonomy due to their status as “the Other” in terms of their gender, class, and race. Because of their suppressed agency, black women are usually limited in the ways they can respond to obstacles, confrontations, and crises, which is exemplified by Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 autobiographical slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, as well as by Sethe, who is based on the historical figure, Margaret Garner, in Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel, *Beloved*. The former portrays Jacobs’ mental torments and sexual abuses as a female slave and her continued trauma even when she is freed. Morrison’s novel is similar in that it depicts Sethe’s journey from being enslaved on a plantation to her escape and life with her children afterward; like Jacobs, Sethe also comes to terms with the repercussions of slavery that exist outside of the institution itself.

I will explore motherhood as a method of resistance for black women in the face of oppressive violence, whether the violence is sexual, physical, or mental— or encompasses all three. Although readers usually interpret the type of motherhood functioning in a slavery/neo-slavery context as harmful or counterproductive, Jacobs and Morrison “define and position maternal identity as a site of power for black women” (O’Reilly, 1). Motherhood becomes empowering for historical figures such as Jacobs or Linda Brent—her pseudonym in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Sethe also gains moments of agency over her oppressor through sacrifices she makes to protect her children even though such acts (including the killing her eldest daughter) are not easily understood by other characters or even by certain readers. Having reproductive freedom (in the ability to select one’s partner, mother one’s children, etc.) opposes the white supremacist patriarchy and lessens control over the black body, propelling these black women towards rebellion and defiance of the institutionalized structures that capitalized on their sacrifice, toil, and pain.

Through narrative, Jacobs and Morrison depict various types of motherhood and mothering that differ from Westernized, bourgeois notions of the submissive, doting, and sensitive mother—essentially, a depiction of motherhood that has become solidified in American culture and boils down to nothing more than a Jungian archetype. When it comes to Jacobs’ narrative, as a young girl, she expands the options of her already limited reproductive partners by finding a father in the ambiguous but affluent white man and slave owner, Mr. Sands. Their sexual intimacy results in her eventual pregnancy, which momentarily obstructs Dr. Flint’s planned isolation of Jacobs, and subsequently destroys any plans he has to sexually abuse her in the secrecy of her new cottage. In Jacobs’s eyes,

mothering two children and protecting them from the cruelties of slavery is a motivating factor in not only assuring their survival, but also her own. Her children provide her with a sense of purpose within the institution of slavery.

In telling her story, Jacobs uses the rhetorical tactics of sentimentalism to share her far removed viewpoint in an attempt to gain sympathy, notoriety, and cultural capital while enlightening predominantly white audiences of her struggles. She specifically targeted white female readers, who had the ability to aid abolition via the early women's suffrage movement. Just as Jacobs uses sentimentalism to reach her readers, Morrison utilizes the genre of magical realism to deconstruct absolutist belief systems, challenging us to reconsider what may be seen as "rational" or "scientifically proven." By using magical realism in *Beloved*, Morrison depicts motherhood as a form of social activism in its rejection of traditional nuclear family structures and its embrace of African American communalism.

Despite Morrison's critique of the nuclear family, motherhood and family are often a central theme in Morrison's texts. According to Andrea O'Reilly's 2004 collection, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, "Morrison articulates a fully developed theory of African American mothering that is central to her larger political and philosophical stance on black womanhood." Again, Morrison believes black motherhood to be "radically different than the motherhood practiced and prescribed in dominant culture" (O'Reilly, 1). Black mothers in Morrison's texts struggle to "keep children alive in a world hostile to their well being" (117). These motifs that occur frequently in Morrison's texts can easily translate into real world issues. Unable to achieve this archetype of the submissive and doting mother, Sethe practices what various

black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Andrea O'Reilly conceptualize as "preservative love" with her surviving daughter, Denver, and "othermothering" with Beloved, the embodied spirit of her deceased daughter.

"Othermothering" is a subset of community mothering. One accepts the "responsibility for a child not one's own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal" (5). Although "mothering" is a concept that is often presented in society as concrete and non-malleable, there are ultimately many ways to "mother," and the person doing the "mothering" doesn't always have to be biologically female or a singular individual. There are many instances of "othermothering" in Morrison's *Beloved* and in Jacobs' narrative, in addition to the presence of "preservative love." O'Reilly's defines "preservative love" as "preserv[ing], protect[ing], and more generally empower[ing] black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek harm to them and grow into adulthood whole and complete" (2). The tradition of "preservative mothering," like "othermothering" is rooted in West African practices of motherhood; these traditions redefine maternal love in a way that becomes particularly *African American*, upholding and also adapting African traditions, culture, and ancestral memory. According to O'Reilly, both practices remain "central to the African American tradition of motherhood and [are] regarded as essential for the survival of black people" (6).

Extending this argument into a current cultural context that surpasses the realm of literature, I will also consider a contemporary group of politicized black mothers who have occupied the media spotlight due to the untimely deaths of their children, often as a result of police brutality. Names such as Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, and Sandra Bland have occupied news headlines for the last several years.



Due to the deaths of their children, the mothers of these individuals have been thrust into the public eye. They have attended national events such as the Democratic National Convention and the Video Music Awards; their faces and voices have also been featured in music videos, ad campaigns, and countless on-air interviews.

They bring to light a systemic issue that has plagued their communities for generations: numerous societal institutions such as law enforcement have targeted black men and women; and through death rates via police brutality or even through subsequent imprisonment, these institutions relieve us of “the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism” (Davis, n.pg). With this in mind, we can (and must) draw comparisons between the excessive power exerted by the institution of slavery and its contemporary counterpart in the U.S., law enforcement. Looking at the institution of law enforcement as an extension of slavery—as a system under which black bodies are continually controlled, punished, and regulated—similarities can be noted between the maternal autonomy exerted by Jacobs and Morrison’s fictionalized Margaret Garner, who experienced the historical context of U.S. enslavement, and these strong, brave black mothers of the 21st century as they fight to overcome the oppression they face when they lose their children..

For Jacobs and Morrison, mothering represents an opportunity to teach future generations to challenge societal marginalization by developing critical consciousness and upholding black culture. O’Reilly reiterates that “to fulfill the task of empowering children, mothers must hold power in African American culture, and mothering likewise must be valued and supported” (4). Assata Shakur’s 1987 non-fiction narrative, *Assata: An Autobiography* contextualizes the hopes black mothers hold for their children: “I’ll tell

them that this baby was sent by the Black creator to liberate Black people. I'll tell 'em that this baby is the new Black messiah, conceived in a holy way, come to lead our people to freedom and justice and to create a new Black nation" (123). Assata believes her child—and black children in general—to be an embodiment of future racial tolerance and acceptance, a way of forming new, informed generations that have the ability to further dismantle racial (as well as sexual and classist) oppression. Jacobs, Morrison, and many other black mothers of the 21st century hold the same hope for their children. Through their written and oral narratives, they challenge white supremacy and the continual policing of black bodies, demonstrating to the world that such practices are continuing a legacy of slavery that must be reformed and restructured.

### **The Implementation of *Strategic Motherhood***

To understand the racist, sexual, and classist oppression of modern black women, we must, as always, look to past histories. For African-American women, the struggle with systemic oppression began with the institution of slavery. As bell hooks asserts in “Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience” from her 1981 collection of essays, *Ain't I a Woman?*, black women are the “ideal subject for slavery”:

Mass sexual exploitation of enslaved black women was a direct consequence of the anti-woman sexual politics of colonial patriarchal America. Since the black woman was not protected either by law or public opinion, she was an easy target. While racism was clearly the evil that had decreed black people would be enslaved, it was sexism that determined that the lot of the black

female would be harsher, more brutal than that of the black male  
slave. (42-43)

Drawing on hooks' work, I am interested in exploring the overpowering oppressive forces present in the black woman's daily life that are consistently reinforced and often perpetuated by the privileged and their complicity. hooks suggests that black women gained no sense of protection from public opinion or the law during the era of U.S. slavery, which lead them to strategically search for other methods of protection not provided by American institutions. Although many collective movements have made strides through various eras in history to improve the conditions of black women's daily realities and have succeeded in a number of ways, they still suffer the lot of "triple jeopardy."

In addition to the lack of protection black women receive from the law, hooks later argues that men, who are traditionally thought of as the dominant sex in the gender hierarchy, are also unable to protect black women: "The enslaved black woman could not look to any group of men, white or black, to protect her against sexual exploitation" (36). Although the reasons for failure vary based on the male's racial status, the inability for either white or black men to protect the black woman ultimately secures her position as the unprotected, the vulnerable, and the exploited. Creating a gendered binary where men are required to be "the protectors" and women are often seen as "the dependents" in need of said "protection" is dangerous within itself; and ironically enough, this structured power dynamic fosters violence against women because paternalism often results in patriarchal violence. Although paternalism is often covert, the function of it is reliant upon the degradation and infantilization of women; and, in particular, black women, who

must function in society with additional marginalization, have not been able to depend on protection of their bodies or their mental well-being from the state nor from individual men in their lives.

Due to the lack of protection they received from the law and men, the sexual exploitation and abuse of the black slave woman was so normalized that it became a significant milestone in her coming-of-age experience. Along with the beginning of menstruation in their early teen years, black slave women could expect regular advances from their masters around the time they were thirteen or fourteen years of age, as depicted by Jacobs. In “Violence of the Law” from her 2010 collection of essays entitled *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Saidiya Hartman explains, “The rape of a black woman existed as an unspoken but normative condition fully within the purview of everyday sexual practices” (85). These acts of sexual violence were acceptable due to the virtual absence of prohibitions as well as the socially tolerant nature of violence upon the black woman’s body, which was used for pleasure, profit, and punishment.

According to bell hooks, “Rape was not the only method used to terrorize and dehumanize black women. Sadistic floggings of naked black women were another method employed to strip the female slave of dignity” (37). Numerous images throughout African American literature (Aunt Hester from Frederick Douglass’ 1845 memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Dana in Octavia Butler’s 1979 novel *Kindred*, and of course, Sethe in *Beloved*) illustrate the horrifyingly abusive histories against black female bodies through the written word, solidifying these brutal atrocities against humankind in the minds of modern readers. The abuses performed against the will of these individual

women result in numerous issues for their subsequent offspring (cycles of physical violence, familial separation, death, etc.), who, due to the “breeding” imperatives of white slave masters as well as the lack of birth control or prevention during this era in history, were an inevitable result of the sexual abuses perpetuated against black slave women.

With the compounded burden of racial, classist, and sexual oppression, black mothers attempting to survive the terrain of American slavery while protecting their offspring engaged in non-normative forms of motherhood, or *strategic motherhood*, which can be exemplified by the practices of “othermothering” and “preservative love.” Within the canon of American literature, when privileged identities evaluate the image of the black mother, her lack of privilege is rarely considered when gauging her worth. Instead, she is often positioned as “bad” due to her assumed promiscuous nature and her socioeconomic status as a laborer. Her positioning allows for her devaluation, which justifies the ill and exploitive treatment of her children.

Like the motif of black women, depicted as “bad mothers” who are unable to fulfill the role of nurturer, black men within the American literary cannon often struggle to attain the primary provider role because they are not granted with fruitful opportunities to generate income due the continued racial bias that prevents them from achieving certain successes and milestones. However, the black man’s inability to access the power inherent of the white male does not make him any less eager to gain access to that power. Instead of valuing the black women who provide for the family financially and simultaneously care for the household, children, and other domestic responsibilities, readers witness black men demean black women—perhaps in subtle, or even unconscious

ways— so they can obtain some semblance of power that corresponds to their white counterpart.

This sexual discrimination coupled with racial disadvantages means that many black women do not have the necessary social and economic privilege to participate in a more bourgeois form of sensitive mothering—both within literature and within our contemporary reality. Although circumstances for black women have certainly improved since the era of American slavery, racism still affects black motherhood in deeply profound ways. *NPR* released a study in December 2017, “How Racism May Cause Black Mothers To Suffer The Deaths of Their Infants,” detailing how the stresses suffered from racism lead to a rather chilling statistic: “Black babies in the United States die at just over two times the rate of white babies in the first year of their life” (n. pg.). Therefore, black children continue to be at risk due to the presence of racial and classist discrimination, which make black women less likely to carry their babies full-term. With this modern example in mind, it is clear that institutionalized abuse and violence towards black women has extended its looming hand throughout every period of American history in varying ways, encouraging these black mothers to protect what is theirs and what Sethe refers to as her “best thing”—their children.

### **Understanding Sethe’s Choice Through Patricia Hill Collins’ Concepts of Black Motherhood**

Sethe’s love for her children is reduced to a single choice in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Although some slave mothers are detached from any sort of loving relationship with their children, Putnam explains Sethe’s ability to engage in the tenderness involved

with childrearing:

Unlike some other of Morrison's mothers who deny their mother love (like Baby Suggs), Sethe revels in it, both in times of happiness and in despair...Sethe actually shows abundant connections to her children, risking everything for them to escape and celebrating their life together afterward. (38)

Sethe shows a vehement love for her all of her children; after all, Sethe has access to certain privileges her mother and her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, did not, including a relatively stable home life under "benevolent" masters, who allowed her to engage in normative monogamous practices such as "marriage" (though not one that would be legally binding or recognized) and consensual reproduction, generally reserved for white people.

For example, her slave master, Mr. Garner allows Sethe to have all her children with Halle, granting her access to a more traditional familial structure that many enslaved black women never would come to know. After her escape from Sweet Home, Sethe realizes she relied too hard on this stability: "A blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted, lean on, as Sweet Home really was one" (29). Additionally, while Mr. Garner was still alive and well, Sethe did not have to concern herself with thoughts of rape—even the Sweet Home men took the route of bestiality practices as opposed to sexually violating her.

Unfortunately for Sethe, her access to a more traditional familial structure—even though only temporary—rooted her maternal love in a possessive nature that was risky for a slave mother. However, she remains aware of ill-fated narratives of other slave

mothers: children being unexpectedly taken to satisfy some debt of their master, children getting sold on the auction block in front of their mothers, children suffering an unkind death that is looked upon with little remorse, or children running off because they can no longer stand the cruelties of slavery; but she never has to face these harsh realities in her own life until schoolteacher comes to live on Sweet Home's plantation. His reign results in traumatizing experiences that plague Sethe through her planned escape and his attempted recapture of her and her children.

Due to all the circumstances under which her children can randomly be taken from her, those in the black community believe Sethe is forming an unhealthy attachment to her children. Ella, a woman within the community who assists Stamp Paid with their version of the Underground Railroad, makes known her own advice regarding loving attachments, especially towards black children from black women: "If anybody was to ask me I'd say, Don't love nothing" (107). Considering Sethe's position as a black female slave, who escaped her plantation and was not even freed, it is very dangerous, and potentially reckless, for Sethe to devote unconditional motherly love to her four children, who are ultimately viewed as the property of schoolteacher in the absence of the Garners.

Even though younger children typically were of little to no use to slave masters, their eventual value, as potential labor or profit, made their additional care worth their burden. In addition to their eventual worth in the slave market, children also served as a fair amount of leverage to slave owners; they could use the black slave mother's children and the fate of their well being as a form of control. As Hartman confirms, "the exercise of power was inseparable from its display because domination depended upon demonstrations of the slaveholder's dominion and the captive's abasement. The owner's



display of mastery was just as important as the legal title to slave property. In other words, representing power was essential to reproducing domination” (7). Children were a way for slave owners to hold their power over slaves—much like depriving them of an education or disallowing certain intimate networks to form within the slave community.

It all begins when Sethe decides to leave Sweet Home when Mr. Garner passes away and his wife, Mrs. Garner, falls ill and is unable to handle the responsibilities of managing the property and the slaves. With the Garners no longer in power, schoolteacher, Mrs. Garner’s brother-in law, steps in with his two nephews to manage Sweet Home in the Garner’s absence. The Sweet Home Men—the three Pauls, Halle, and Sixo— do not initially see schoolteacher as a threat, but it soon becomes apparent to Sethe that schoolteacher views them as animals. Sethe concludes she must escape for the betterment of her children’s futures:

And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean...She might have to work in the slaughterhouse yard, but not her daughter. And no one, nobody on the earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper. (Morrison 295-96)

With her children’s welfare in mind, Sethe decides to join Baby Suggs in Cincinnati, Ohio, with her husband, Halle, and their three children with one on the way. When Sethe

goes to meet her designated ride, Halle is nowhere to be found. Sethe sends the children off with the fugitive slave train while she stays behind to look for him.

Sensing the unrest on the plantation amongst the slaves after the capture of Sixo and Paul D, schoolteacher's nephews stumble upon Sethe as soon as she arrives back to Sweet Home's farmhouse. The two sexually assault her and take her milk. This sexually charged, painful memory remains significant for her eighteen years later as she recalls:

I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took for me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby... There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have fight and holler for it, and to have so little left. I'll tell Beloved about that; she'll understand. She my daughter. The one I managed to have milk for and to get it to her even after they stole it. (236)

Paul D asks whether or not they used the cowhide on her, but Sethe can only recall that they took her milk. Because this memory consistently resurfaces in her thoughts and conversations throughout the novel, it would seem that the taking of her milk is the most damaging event in this series of personal tragedies done onto Sethe. This traumatizing violation remains at the forefront of Sethe's mind because she equates the stolen milk with depriving her youngest children of the basic nourishment they need to survive.

The taking of her milk serves as an epiphany of sorts for Sethe: she realizes not only is she unable to safeguard the prosperity of her children in this now toxic environment, but she is also unable to protect herself. Although she feels powerless in this moment because she loses the strength to defend herself on the grounds of Sweet

Home, Sethe's driving force throughout her long, painstakingly difficult journey to Ohio is her children. There are times that she considers the possibility of dying; her physical condition is weakening to the point of surrender: "...Sethe was walking on two feet meant for standing still. How they were so swollen she could not see her arch or feel her ankles. Her leg shaft ended in a loaf of flesh scalloped by five toenails" (37). In this description, Morrison depicts the physical pain Sethe experiences, which is almost to the point of bodily mutation, emphasizing her devotion for her children as she pushes through the harshness of the natural terrain to reunite with them.

Despite her deteriorating state with each passing step, Sethe dreams of an antelope, who pushes her along even though death seems like an easier solution to her troubles at the time:

Concerned as she was for the life of her children's mother, Sethe told Denver she remembered thinking: Well, at least I don't have to take another step. A dying thought if ever there was one, and she waited for the little antelope to protest, and why she thought of an antelope Sethe could not imagine since she had never seen one.

(37)

Even though Sethe has never seen an antelope, there is significance to her imagining this particular animal as the one encouraging her to overcome her current physical limitations. Here, Morrison is implementing fantastical elements often seen in the genre of magical realism to make a political critique. Sethe does not reduce herself to the animal schoolteacher believes her to be, but instead, re-aligns herself with this creature indigenous of Africa, using her own perseverance and wit to outsmart her own predators.

Sethe is also calling upon this pre-slavery memory to sustain her in this trying moment where she is tempted to forgo her physical body. For Morrison, a memory is a concept that extends beyond a single personhood and impacts entire communities. Sethe's positive "rememory" of the antelope is pushing her forward, which contrasts most of her "rememories" including a detailed flashback of being transported on a slave ship—again, a situation she has not encountered in her physical life yet can relay the experience of due to her connection with the African American community.

Apart from the image of the antelope, Amy Denver is another reason for Sethe's survival of the natural elements in her physically and mentally brutalized condition. Adhering to notions of strategic motherhood inherent of African American communities, Amy Denver highlights the fact that the person engaging in the act of "mothering" does not always have to be an actual mother and serves as a significant figure in *Beloved's* narrative of "othermothering." Even is also not of African descent, she has known nothing more than a life of indentured servitude, attempting to pay off the debt of her mother who died when giving birth to her. To some extent, Amy Denver understands a life of imprisonment where one's individual freedoms are non-existent, and although readers know absolutely nothing of her history aside from this, one can assume given her gender that she has most likely been sexually assaulted or abused due to her calm response to Sethe's bloody wounds given to her by schoolteacher and his nephews—instead of being horrified, she finds beauty in the future scars and knows the exact steps to take to heal them.

Since Denver refuses to engage with Sethe's narrative of Sweet Home, the story of her life begins with Amy Denver. She is eager to hear the story of Sethe's escape to

Cincinnati repeatedly, and in being named Denver after her mother's unlikely hero, it is one story that she is unable to avoid. In the small amount of time that Amy Denver is with Sethe, Amy nurses Sethe's feet back to health and soothes the scars on the back. Eventually, she aids Sethe in the delivery of Denver, serving as an impromptu midwife, who is traditionally a nurturing figure to both mother and child.

Even though Sethe recognizes Amy's help in her escape, she also realizes the strength in her own achievement. Talking to Paul D, she insists: "I did it. I got us all out." Sethe makes her intention to escape Sweet Home just as clear as her motivation to slaughter her children one-by-one before sending them back there with schoolteacher: she wants to claim her children as her own. She relays the limitations slavery has on her ability to love as a mother to Paul D: "...maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off the wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to" (190-191).

But Sethe had to make the journey on her own due to the sudden abandonment by her lover, "husband" of six years, and the father of her four children. Unlike the experience of many female slaves, Sethe's relationship with Halle feels relatively stable to her, but this is only how their "union" functions under the Garner's ownership. The two are allowed certain to engage in many freedoms associated with a monogamous marriage. For example, the Garners allow Sethe and Halle to have the "matrimonial ceremony" that Sethe desires. Sethe makes her own wedding dress, and Mrs. Garner passes down a pair of crystal earrings to honor Sethe's special day. After the marriage, the two couple together and keep house under the same roof, emulating the model of a white heteronormative relationship.

However, this heteronormative dynamic between Sethe and Halle begins to shift drastically during the chaos of the Sweet Home rebellion. Halle is traumatized by the loss of his friends, who were practically brothers to him, either through death, relocation, or downright insanity. In addition, he witnesses the rape of his pregnant wife and the mother of his soon-to-be four children once she returns to Sweet Home to find him. Eighteen years later, Paul D describes the image of Halle with freshly churned butter smeared all over his face, driven mad by the treatment of his friends and family under schoolteacher's rule, and it is almost too much for Sethe to handle.

For years, she has imagined the scenarios that prevented Halle from meeting the fugitive slave train, and out of the hundreds of possibilities, she never thought Halle would break so easily while she continued to persevere. Halle's reaction to the travesties that occur on Sweet Home after schoolteacher comes to power negate the masculine image of "the protector." Additionally, it highlights the ways in which black men are emasculated within a racist society because even though they are conditioned to be masculine, they are also prevented from exerting their masculinity in certain ways due to racist practices. When faced with her own gendered issues, such as being thought of as purely a breeder for schoolteacher's stock, Sethe finds a way to push through these sexualized depictions of her black body to save herself and the lives of her children.

Like Halle, Paul D also shows weakness in moments where Sethe seems to need him most. He can only tolerate Beloved's presence in 124 for so long. When Beloved shows up, her obsession with Sethe is clear, and she attempts to out him from 124 to establish a hyper-female household. Like a lost puppy, Paul D moves from room to room, trying to find comfortable place to rest his head each night. First, he no longer feels

content in Sethe's room and then Baby Suggs' former room—the keeping room also becomes a place of discomfort. Finally, he ends up in the coal shed with some sense of peace until Beloved begins to appear in the shed each night to copulate with him.

Even though Paul D continues this destructive behavior that sabotages his romantic connection with Sethe, he still feels empowered enough to judge her violent past once a news clipping is given to him by Stamp Paid, reporting the incident of her eldest daughter's murder. The shock of the news coupled with Paul D's inability to handle his displacement of power in Beloved's presence is a crucial hit to his masculinity, which he has always felt insecure about. He recalls how “Garner called and announced them men—but only on Sweet Home...Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not? ... It troubled [Paul D] that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point. Oh, he did manly things, but was that Garner's gift or his own will?” (220). Simply put, Paul D cannot ascertain whether he possesses masculine qualities or if these traits were simply projected upon him by Garner. His inability to be there for Sethe due to the white heteropatriarchy leads him to continue to question his masculinity as a black man; eventually, he convinces himself that there is little he can do to provide or protect Sethe or Denver despite his attempts.

At the same time, Paul D does not understand Sethe's motivations to kill her daughter despite having been a slave and a member of a Georgia chain gang. With this being said, he has never engaged in motherly acts, or much less served in any parental role (although he is eager to establish himself as such with Denver but seems unsure how to approach it) that might provide him with insight to the lengths black parents go to preserve the lives of their children. Sethe, however, never seemed to expect any help

from Paul D when it came to parental practices, being that over the past eighteen years, she's brought up her remaining children in a strictly maternal household—once composed of not only Baby Suggs but the local African American community at-large. After she murders her eldest daughter, this support network is reduced to Baby Suggs and her three children, and once Baby Suggs dies and Howard and Buglar run away from 124, it is simply Denver and she.

Even though Denver remains, Sethe still feels an emptiness for having lost the majority of her biological offspring—much like Baby Suggs. Sethe's relationship with her own mother, whom she refers to as "Ma'am" follows the model of "othermothering," considering her mother was always at work in the cotton fields. Therefore, Sethe is reared by a maternal figure on her childhood plantation who was responsible for all the slave children's upbringing. Sethe's biological mother is aware of her own absence in her daughter's life, but at the same time, she knows there's nothing she can do to change the power structures at work that prevent her from seeing her only child.

But Ma'am recognizes her child's inability to physically identify her by facial features since they are often separated; one day, she pulls Sethe aside and instructs her as to how she can identify her body if she is killed by pointing out the circle and cross that has been branded into her skin. During this powerful moment, young Sethe comes to realize the fragility of the slave mother's relationship with their offspring; in any given moment, her mother could be taken away from her—and in a manner so careless that the young girl would be expected to identify the body because no one else could be bothered by something so insignificant. Sethe does not have the ability to voice her acknowledgement of such a crucial understanding given her age, but she does ask her



mother if she could also receive the same mark as a means to tie the two together. Her mother slaps her in response.

Because the practice of “othermothering” is so prevalent in Sethe’s childhood, it seems natural to her to immediately begin nurturing Beloved when the strange girl randomly appears one day, drenched in water and sitting unconsciously on a stump outside of 124—again, denoting another fantastical moment of magical realism. Since neither she, Paul D, nor Denver know where Beloved has come from, they question her past whereabouts. Beloved does not seem to know much about herself either— beyond the fact that she journeyed from a bridge over water to see “her face.” The pronoun “her” remains ambiguous at this point, but the reader eventually comes to understand that the woman Beloved is referring to is Sethe. Although Sethe remains unaware as to Beloved’s identity even long after Denver has discovered that Beloved is her deceased older sister, Sethe continues to provide her with food, clothing, and shelter and seems to be in no rush to uncover her true identity or oust her from 124. Morrison writes, “Sethe was flattered by Beloved’s open, quiet devotion. The same adoration from her daughter (had it been forthcoming) would have annoyed her” (68). Because Sethe does not realize or consciously acknowledge Beloved as her daughter until the end of the novel, her love, care, and concern for her could be seen as “othermothering.”

But again, “othermothering” isn’t simply reserved for women who have already been mothers themselves. Once Beloved reappears, Denver takes on a very motherly role herself. At the time, Denver is seventeen years old. Given the historical context of this novel, it is fair to consider that many black women would have been made a mother by this age due to the sexual violations made against them; therefore, it is not unusual for

Denver to assume the role in a seemingly “natural” way. What is odd is that Denver, a girl who is normally only concerned about her own history relative to the larger slave narrative of Sweet Home as well as her own hobbies and obsessions (food, the Emerald Closet, perfume, etc.), becomes increasingly concerned about the well being of Beloved. Beloved’s physical reemergence contextualizes past events for Denver; she gains an understanding of her family’s experiences with violence, sadness, anger, and struggle that were born out of slavery because now, they are finally unfolding before her very eyes instead of being spoken of to her as past occurrences. For Denver, it took more than orally told stories to understand the lingering repercussions of the institution of slavery to their fullest extent and how they have continually burdened her family—it was a story that once didn’t belong to her, but now, it does through the embrace of her “rememories.”

Denver is haunted by Beloved’s presence throughout the entirety of her life—even before Beloved manifests herself, Denver deals with the spite of 124 destroying her family: her two brothers run away from home, Baby Suggs no longer can see the beauty in the world and makes a conscious decision to leave the Earthly realm, and Sethe becomes listless in her daily routine. Denver’s life is saturated with thoughts, conversations, and even interactions with Beloved before she appears on the stump that day. Being only weeks old when Beloved was killed, Denver has no living recollection of her sister. However, when Denver first meets the girl that emerges from the water, she takes an instinctual liking to her and admits to readers later: “Look like I was the only one who knew right away who it was. Just like when she came back I knew who she was too” (246). Even though Denver has distinct recognition of Beloved as the spirit that plagued her family for all these years, she sees her as someone who is “waiting for

[her]...ready to be taken care of; ready for [Denver] to protect her” (243). Like a mother, Denver finds a significant purpose for her existence. To Denver, the threat is Sethe, who killed her sister previously, and she must go through great lengths to keep her mother away from Beloved this time around. Though the task is impossible since the two seem to have a magnetic draw to one another, which manifests as a version of a mother/daughter relationship, Denver works relentlessly day and night for months to ensure the success of her plan. She relays to readers, “All the time, I’m afraid the thing that happen that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don’t know what it is, I don’t know who it is, but maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again” (242).

Denver remains successful in her venture for some time, but ultimately, the inevitable occurs: Sethe and Beloved become increasingly co-dependent on one another. Sethe relies on Beloved for validation and acceptance, and in the process, she gives Beloved all that she physically and mentally demands of her, dwindling Sethe down to nothing as Beloved’s spiteful gluttony claims her mother’s mind and body. Denver shamefully admits that “[s]he took the best of everything,” and the more she continued to take, the more “Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children” (284). Like those in the community who know the horror story of the day schoolteacher came for Sethe and her children, Beloved does not understand why her mother would commit such a horrendous act, and she punishes Sethe for the pain she has caused her.

Even Sethe’s two surviving sons, Howard and Buglar, come to fear her and the horror she is capable of, but as she repeatedly tries to explain to Beloved, the reasoning

for her violent action was a form of “preservative love.” Although “preservative love” is typically upheld as a method to “preserve” children and see them into a successful adulthood, Sethe repurposes the term in the only way she can see fit in this given moment where she is trapped in a physically small space of Baby Suggs’ shed. Sethe must “kill her own daughter...to claim that daughter as her own over and above the master’s claim” and redirect “her racialized powerlessness into maternal possession” (Putnam, 37). As Stamp Paid thoughtfully explains to Ella and Paul D, “She ain’t crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out-hurt the hurter” (276). For three weeks, Sethe is allowed to experience complete peace with her children, Baby Suggs, and the larger black community before schoolteacher returns for his property and drives Sethe to reclaim what she feels she may lose. She chooses to do so through violence.

Although her decision to slit Beloved’s throat may seem paradoxical to the average outsider, especially while considering the practice of “preservative love,” Sethe’s decision allows her to exert her power over her child’s life. She had gained some semblance of freedom by escaping Sweet Home, but it was not enough to completely break the repetitious power struggle between slave and slave master. She is cornered, reduced to complete helplessness, and threatened with being taken back to a home she has grown to hate along with her four innocent children in tow. Sethe, like any right-minded individual, panics. Not only is she physically trapped in Baby Suggs’ shed as her abusers approach, but she is also economically trapped with no prospects of a better future if this plan fails and emotionally trapped in the fears typical of one who is abused, berated, and tortured. She comes to a moment of clarity in this pressurized moment: she realizes that there is no way she will gain freedom for herself and all of her children in a

known, physical realm. When she slits Beloved's throat, she is ultimately devising to kill each of her children and herself because "her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever" (284). Her plan of escaping to an otherworldly plain, far from the concrete horrors of slavery, ultimately fails when the door of the shed is opened by schoolteacher, and Sethe is surrounded by carnage, nearly having removed the head of her eldest daughter as her three remaining children freeze bewilderedly, crying with plastered looks of terror on their faces.

Sethe realizes the hurt she has caused her children both alive, dead, and missing, in her decision, but she refuses to admit any wrongdoing in her actions beyond the guilt of physically hurting Beloved and emotionally scarring all of them. She aligns her beliefs with Morrison's own: African American mothering is "radically different than the motherhood [practiced] and prescribed in dominant culture" (O'Reilly, 1). She pleads her case in multiple instances throughout the novel including to Paul D, when she says, "I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher;" yet ultimately, she concludes, "If they didn't get it right off—she could never explain. Because the truth was simple..." (192). Therefore, whether or not her children, lovers, or community come to terms with Sethe's decision is irrelevant to her. She chose to engage in a subverted form of "preservative love" rooted in violence with the ultimate goal to all rejoin all of her children on "the other side," which seemed like a more viable future for her family than returning to Sweet Home.

### **Harriet Jacobs' Calculated Self-Confinement Reiterates Black Feminist Theory**

Similar to Morrison's protagonist, Harriett Jacobs also wants a better life for her children—a life where they don't have to experience all the horrors she had to come terms with under the iron rule of slavery and her cruel master. Although Jacobs lives a relatively tranquil childhood where she did not realize her own enslavement, her conditions slowly began to deteriorate after the death of her "kind" mistress. Jacobs is left to the daughter of her mistresses' brother-in-law, Dr. Flint—a man more notorious in his abuses of female slaves than his contributions to nineteenth century medicine.

From an early age, Jacobs comes to realize the horrors in store for the young slave woman, especially as female slave under the power of such a conniving, emotionally manipulative man, who has the tenacity to relentlessly pursue those already in submission to him, use them for his will, and throw them away at the slightest inconvenience—whether it'd be the jealousy of his wife, the potential destruction of his reputation, or the possibility of having the woman and their child within his proximity. Jacobs recalls:

I shuddered to think of a being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant. I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold off to get rid of them, especially if they had children. I had seen several women sold, with his babies at the breast. He never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife. (49)

Like Sethe, Jacobs' autonomy is not protected by law as a female slave; she is regularly subject to Dr. Flint's game of cat and mouse. And, again, like Sethe, Jacobs has to adjust to once being under the ownership of benevolent slave owners only to be roughly thwarted into the true nightmare that slavery truly is for a young black woman.

Harriet's first attempt to overcome her master's relentless perusal of her appears to be naïve since there would be no logical way for her to marry a man of her choice under the rule of a tyrant such as Flint—yet it gives her the confidence to begin developing various strategies of escape. Jacobs' first love serves as a personal liberation for the young slave woman because she can see an alternative life outside of Dr. Flint's emotional and sexual abuse:

If there was one pure, sunny spot for me, I believed it to be in Benjamin's heart, and in another's, whom I loved with all the ardor of a girl's first love. My owner knew of it, and sought in every way to render me miserable. He did not resort to corporal punishment, but to all the petty, tyrannical ways that human ingenuity could devise. (19)

In this moment, Jacobs realizes the power she exerts in loving another and sparking the rage of Dr. Flint, a man who is consistently granted with his every desire in his emotional and sexual exploit of the female slave. She is prevented from being with her first love because of his race; he is a black man, and although he is free, he exhibits limited power in marrying Jacobs. She realizes that “if [she] was married near home [she] should be just as much in [Dr. Flint's] power as [she] had previously been—for the husband of a slave has no power to protect her” (34). To spare her lover of any more feelings of powerlessness, Jacobs selflessly forgoes the romance. Describing him as an “intelligent” and “religious” man, she realizes her lover's sensibilities are no match for her master's

will and determination to keep her within his grasp. Even if they were allowed to be married, her lover would be a witness to her constant degradation by her master and mistress.

Soon after her potential engagement falls through, Jacobs becomes subject to Dr. Flint's latest plan. He will isolate Jacobs from his wife by providing her with her own cottage on the outskirts of town. In the midst of all this occurring, Mr. Sands, an affluent member of the community, becomes aware of Jacobs' situation and is interested in helping her. Since the narrative is from Jacobs' perspective, readers never become informed of Mr. Sands' true intentions with Jacobs or why he takes such a liking to her, but even though he is a slaveholder like her own master, he becomes symbolic of a sort of freedom for Jacobs:

...but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. (48)

The unspoken sexual contract between Jacobs and Mr. Sands is "akin to" liberation for her; she feels more secure about reproducing with this man as opposed to Dr. Flint. For Jacobs, the right to access some degree of consent is a kind of freedom, making her relationship with Mr. Sands preferable in comparison. She respects him even though the particular reasons are not made clear in her dialogue. It could have been as simple as the



fact that he was a man “who was not [her] master” (49) and possesses more power than her previous African American love interest.

In her decision to copulate with Mr. Sands, Jacobs is participating in her version of *strategic motherhood*. Instead of using violence like her fictional contemporary, Sethe, she utilizes her sexuality as currency to claim what will be her future children. Jacobs explains to her readers using sentimentalism that normative, moral standards typical of the dominant religion in the U.S. during this time (Christianity) are impossible to achieve as a black female slave. She pleads with intended white female audience, “O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of chattel, entirely subject to the will of another...I feel that the slave woman ought not be judged by the same standard as others” (49). She knows as well as other female slaves that a chaste feminine morality should not be applied to the black woman, who is raised not only as a domestic laborer or field hand, but also as sexually disposable to her master— unlike her privileged, white Victorian counterparts that come from elegance and lavishness as a lady-in-waiting with a valued virginity. Even though her grandmother taught her to stay the moral course, Jacobs relays that this task is extremely difficult to navigate under such a cruel institution where Dr. Flint awaits her at every unturned corner, representing an impending sexual, physical, and emotional threat. As far as readers know, her grandmother only served under a “benevolent” mistress, but it is safe to assume that a white man could have targeted her at some point in her life as well.

Aunt Marthy’s insistence that Jacobs stay a moral course under slavery even though she recognizes that this is impossible for Jacobs as a female slave is akin to the

“talk” black parents often have with their children in a contemporary context, concerning law enforcement. Although it is unfeasible to guarantee safety from the institutionalized powers that be— no matter how submissively one behaves— black parents continue to search for reinforcement that their children are “behaving,” so they can feel more at ease with allowing their child to interact in public spaces away from their watchful eye. By holding Jacobs to a staunch moral standard, Aunt Marthy is ultimately grasping at the thought of a safe future—one free of sexual abuse and assault—for her granddaughter, who through the practice of “othermothering,” has become like a daughter to her. Unfortunately for Aunt Marthy, due to the world’s chaotic and non-absolutist tendencies that are especially prevalent for a young female slave, there is no way she could ever protect Jacobs from the manipulation she suffers under Dr. Flint.

Despite Jacobs’ decision to reproduce with Mr. Sands, her struggle for freedom is far from over after she gives birth. Her son, Benny, and daughter, Ellen, are never guaranteed safety or protection in any concrete way. She is also not given the time or the resources to dote on them in a traditionally nurturing way; therefore, she is unable to conform to the model of “sensitive mothering” espoused by white women who possess a more privileged place in U.S. society. Her inability to engage in a sensitive form of mothering is coupled with a second challenge: “[b]lack women raise children in a society that is at best indifferent to the needs of black children and the concerns of black mothers” (O’Reilly, 4). Therefore, Jacobs resorts to “preservative mothering” not only when it comes to choosing the father of her children, but also in her decision to confine herself to her grandmother’s attic crawl space.

Before her decision to take this specific course of action, Jacobs is active in negotiating her children's freedom with Dr. Flint. Even though the children are not biologically his, they are legally his property through his ownership of Jacobs. He taunts Jacobs with this cruel fact: "Linda, you desire freedom for yourself and your children, and you can obtain it only through me" (71). Since Jacobs rebukes sexual relations with Dr. Flint repeatedly—even by committing the ultimate act of rebellion in having two children by another man—her children become the only way he can continue to leverage his power over her. Dr. Flint typically presents his manipulative intentions as proposed solutions to Harriet, but his propositions ultimately benefit him in the long run. In one instance, Dr. Flint tells her, "You must either accept my offer [to live in a private cottage with your children], or you and your children shall be sent to your young master's plantation, there to remain till your young mistress is married; and your children shall fare like the rest of the negro children" (71). Soon after she hears this from her tormentor, she comes to learn through second-hand knowledge that Dr. Flint is preparing to put her children to work as slaves on his son-in-law's plantation alongside her.

In June of 1835, after seven years of mistreatment, Jacobs escapes the plantation of Dr. Flint's son-in-law. She hopes that her escape and Dr. Flint's determination to find her will distract him from her children from the time being. Paired with his frustration over their missing mother, Dr. Flint also finds it exasperating that her children are seemingly useless to him now because they are too young to exert hard labor and in the absence of Jacobs, they no longer serve as leverage over their mother in his twisted, sadistic treatment of her. Jacobs does have a means to escape further north, but she is

hesitant to do so because she feels that Dr. Flint's determination to regain his power over her is too strong to make a predictable move in fleeing to New York City.

Jacobs continues to look for ways to outsmart Dr. Flint's cunning nature, and to her, the best way to stay one step ahead of Dr. Flint is to ironically remain closer to home. Figuring that he would seek her out in larger Northern cities, Jacobs believes there is nowhere that she will be safer than in her grandmother's home; this would be the last place her abuser would look for her, being that it's within such close proximity to him. Now, while Jacobs feels secure being close to her family including her grandmother and her two children, the crawl space in which she confines herself in is less than ideal in terms of comfort. The crawl space was nine feet long by seven feet wide, and its sloping ceiling, only three feet high at one end, did not allow her to adjust herself very comfortably.

However, she does find solace in a small peephole where she could watch her children as they played outside. Even though Jacobs is physically removed from her children, her intended isolation becomes a form of *strategic mothering* where she is still engaging in her children's daily pursuits, witnessing both their positive emotions (laughter, play, etc.) and negative ones (interacting with Dr. Flint, missing their mother's physical presence, etc.) By participating in her children's lives out of physical view, Jacobs is engaging in "preservative love" once again. She hopes that confining herself to the crawl space will lessen Dr. Flint's grip upon Benny and Ellen— while simultaneously, being involved in their day-to-day lives. In her decision to remain at her grandmother's home, she illustrates the difficulty black mothers have in separating themselves completely from their children, knowing of the looming threats that await

them as they age into young adults. She confesses to readers, “The mother of slaves is very watchful. She knows there is no security for her children. After they have entered their teens she lives in daily expectation of trouble” (50). Jacobs particularly recognizes Ellen’s struggle as a young female slave as “the doom that awaited [her] fair baby in slavery” and how she is “determined to save her from it, or perish in the attempt” (77). She even makes a “vow at the graves of my poor parents” to do everything within her power to protect both of her children.

Jacobs goes and stays in hiding for reasons beyond merely protecting her children; she uses her self-confinement as a way to eventually gain possession of the two once she realizes that she cannot rely on Mr. Sands for their freedom. Her mistrust in Mr. Sands comes to a head when Jacobs’ brother, William, who is a slave of Mr. Sands, escapes during a business trip the two take up north. With the public speculation positioning Mr. Sands as the victim, many in the community begin to see William as an “ungrateful wretch,” which allows Sands to maintain his powerful position as the benevolent slaveholder. However, Jacobs sees through this manipulative charade. She realizes in this moment that Sands is no better than Dr. Flint in certain ways; he still values the fact that William is his property over the fact that he is supposedly like a brother to him.

Mr. Sands’ empty promises of William’s eventual freedom echo the meaningless assurances that he makes to Jacobs concerning the freedom of their own children. Once he obtains ownership of the children after Dr. Flint’s scheme to use them to lure Harriet fails, Jacobs believes that their father will free them. Instead, Ellen is sent to live with a cousin of Sands in Jacobs’ absence. Jacobs is assured by her grandmother that this will be

best for Ellen—most likely purely in an attempt to comfort her already suffering granddaughter— but Jacobs with her mother’s intuition cannot help but wonder:

Had my child’s father merely placed her there till she was old enough to support herself? Or had he given her to his cousin, as a piece of property? If the last idea was correct, his cousin might return to the south at any time, and hold Ellen as a slave. I tried to put away from me the painful thought that such a foul wrong could have been done to us. I said to myself, ‘Surely there *must* be some justice in man’; then I remembered, with a sigh, how slavery perverted all the natural feelings of the human heart. (115)

Even though Mr. Sands is the father of her children, Jacobs cannot completely trust that he will not utilize their children as his property. They are a part of his bloodline and future legacy, but they were also a financial investment that he must continue to maintain. His explanation for sending them north echoes Aunt Marthy’s: Sands claims that it is for their protection from any further threat by Dr. Flint. Sands’ cousin seems to have different intentions, however; she plans to use Ellen as a waiting maid for her daughter.

When Jacobs is separated from her children during this time, she can no longer engage in their daily activities or monitor their well being. This is devastating to both parties—even putting the children’s lives on the line in certain aspects. For example, Jacobs cannot check on Ellen’s physical condition for quite some time when she is living with Sands’ cousin who seems to have little regard for the young girl’s health. When Jacobs is finally able to see Ellen, her fears are confirmed when her only daughter is visibly malnourished and neglected. However, despite all the obstacles the three continue

to face once Jacobs comes out of confinement, she continues to make strategic sacrifices—such as moving around the country to ensure her anonymity and continuing to work odd jobs in order to earn enough money for her children to attend school—to ensure that her children survive, then thrive successfully in adulthood. Therefore, even though she is technically out of confinement, she remains hidden until she secured safety for her children (and herself) through the help of Mrs. Bruce, a beneficiary who secures their freedom.

When issues surrounding black motherhood present themselves, Jacobs is not the only mother in the narrative who resorts to West African practices of motherhood. Due to the fact that Harriet's mother dies when she is relatively young, her grandmother, Aunt Marthy, looks after her. In her mother's absence, Aunt Marthy becomes an "othermother" for Harriet. Thankfully for Jacobs, her grandmother possessed a good deal of clout in the white community for a black woman. She was known as an upstanding, model slave throughout her many years of her servitude. As a slave, she started a baking business, and with the money she acquired, she was able to buy freedom for a few of her children. Once she was freed, she is able to maintain her business due to her favorable stance in the community; this allows her to purchase a home, feed and clothe her children and grandchildren, and provide herself with a substantial amount of comfort.

However, Aunt Marthy had her struggles under Dr. Flint's rule as well, even though she was never sexually tormented by him— as far as readers are informed through the narrative—Aunt Marthy is promised freedom from her mistress once she dies; however, the proper documents were not put into place to ensure this. Seeing this as an opportunity to exert his power, Dr. Flint puts Aunt Marthy up for sale despite the promise

made by her mistress. When the day arrives, Aunt Marthy proudly stands on the auction block for all to see (even though Dr. Flint tells her it is not necessary) for she knows the shame it will bring him. By doing this, Aunt Marthy displays her skill in *strategic mothering*. She knows that if she is sold privately, she will be separated from her family, and considering her age, she will most likely never reconnect with them. Aunt Marthy's plan to parade herself across the dreaded slave auction block is her way to demonstrate the cruelty of Dr. Flint, obtain feelings of empathy from the community, and gain her freedom once and for all, so she may live out the remainder of her life surrounded by her beloved kin. She gains the exact reaction she is seeking. When members of the community see her for sale on the auction block, they question why she is even up there, and no one will agree to purchase her for any given amount. Finally, the sister of her former mistress purchases her and immediately signs her freedom papers. Because of this, Aunt Marthy is allowed to stay with her children and grandchildren. Like Jacobs, she makes a sacrifice that is not easily understood for the benefit of her children (and grandchildren) due to the limitations forced upon her in her role as the "Other."

### **The Power of Black Motherhood in Our Current Cultural Moment**

Jacobs and Sethe (or her historical counterpart Margaret Garner) make sacrifices to pave the way for their children's futures outside of the institution of slavery. Cornered in the shed of 124 after her successful escape to Cincinnati, Sethe has no other means to save her children other than wielding a knife to their throats in attempt to remove them from this temporal, earthly sphere, and in her belief, to an otherworldly, celestial space where they can finally live together in peace as a familial unit. Jacobs, although under a



similar threat to her children's well being, has more time to construct a plan of action after a series of trials and errors. Her confinement and subsequent removal from the threatening purview of her abuser allow her children more freedom than they would have gained with her presence on the plantation. Despite the methods they choose, their motivations were similar in nature: to preserve the lives of their children—whether through adapted African traditions of “othermothering,” “preservative love,” or both—and pave a way to a more successful future than the ones they were given in their harsh experience as black slave women.

Although the narrative has improved for black women since the era of slavery that Jacobs and Sethe's real-life counterpart, Margaret Garner, endured, there is still much work to be done in terms of dismantling systems of sexism, racism, and classism in modern-day America. While it is true that black women have gained more agency in U.S. society since the period of enslavement, the policing and exploitation of black bodies is still an issue in the 21st century. Often, we focus on the slaying of black men through institutionalized violence, and the violence perpetuated against the black woman or the black femme is relatively hidden from public view—unless you are proactive in finding such news. (One method would be following social justice activists on social media platforms such as Instagram or Twitter. They often repost important information, sometimes accrued from friends, colleagues, or underground publications to share with the general public; it allows you to bypass more traditional, restrictive publications.)

Additionally, when we think of images of police brutality, the faces are usually men such as Mike Brown, Rodney King, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and Trayvon Martin. These names we hear repeated in the mainstream media more often than

the names of black females such as Charleena Lyles, the 30-year old black pregnant mother of three shot seven times by Seattle police in 2017, or Korryn Gaines, a 23 year-old mother of one shot by Baltimore County police officers in 2016 while her 5 year-old son's arm was left broken from the incident. These two incidents are merely a brief example of all the institutionalized abuses black mothers or mothers-to-be face; there are also numerous stories of pregnant black women being punched, tasered, and verbally demeaned by law enforcement despite the minor nature of most of their crimes, ranging from minor traffic stop incidents to failure to cooperate with the police. This violence against black women parallels the "historic accounts of brutal plantation justice" that are now regularly inflicted on women in the African American community.

Through the abuses black women face upon their own person to the trauma they witness their children experiencing in their own lives (in the form of hate crimes, police brutality, gang violence, incarceration, and in some cases, death), the black woman continues to suffer from "triple jeopardy." She is still viewed as lascivious, a stereotype further perpetuated by mainstream visual media, as well as economically dependent, an image solidified in the public eye during the crack epidemic of the 1980s when the conception of the "welfare mother" became prominent. As a supposed "burden to the state," her body and the bodies of her children must be regulated through surveillance and punishment by public institutions.

As Hortense Spillers, black feminist scholar and literary critic, explains in her 1987 article, "'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe': An American Grammar Book", methods of bodily surveillance continued to be redefined yet grounded in the same racist ideologies that remain unexamined and unnamed by those in power:

Even though the captive flesh/body has been ‘liberated,’ and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is ‘murdered’ over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (68)

Even though black mothers are often depicted as neglectful, abusive, and even criminal in the ways they “cheat the system,” these deterministic traits— lascivious, impoverished, and angry—are often imposed upon them to undermine the real systemic issue at hand.

Although families of all racial and ethnic groups, including African Americans, are organized in ways that differ from the traditional models of familial systems, it does not mean that they are any less complex or tight-knit structures in place. Trayvon Martin, like many Millennials and Gen-Zers, was well aware of the modern complications of the familial structure, but he never felt deprived of the support he needed according to his parents, Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin. As they discuss in their autobiography, *Rest in Power: A parent’s story of love, injustice, and the birth of a movement*, the two had a solid co-parenting relationship, in addition to a vast network of family and friends to support their son. Members of the family such as Sybrina’s brother, Ronnie, “adored Trayvon” and helped “take care of him, frequently cooking meals and feeding him” (14). His father’s girlfriend, Brandy and her son, Chad, also welcomed Trayvon into Brandy’s townhome—located in the neighborhood where he was murdered—whenever he wished

to visit. As Tracy Martin relays to readers, “Sybrina was the custodial parent, and the kids primarily lived with her, but Trayvon still spent as much time as he could with me... Whichever house they were in, they knew they were always welcome and deeply loved” (23).

During this time, the family remained transparent that Trayvon was straying off the right path, but it was something they were trying to rectify with their son before he was murdered. As his father Tracy Martin explains, he sat down with his son mere days before his murder to address “his problems at school, his slipping grades, and his suspension, how he needed to get down to business when he returned to school if he wanted to go to college.” He tells his son that “[c]oming out of high school and going straight into the workforce shouldn’t be your goal... You should aim higher than that... your expectations should be getting higher as you get older” (27). Both of his parents saw the potential Trayvon had to succeed at his dream career, aviation, and maintained that his recent behavior was normal for a teenager trying to find his place in the world during a typical transitional phase in one’s life, but Trayvon did not live long enough to see what his life would eventually amount to once he graduated high school.

Unfortunately, Trayvon’s story is one of many in modern-day America. Heightened surveillance instilled by policymakers coupled with the deadly use of militarized police forces continues to be a topic of contention for many, especially those in black communities where these initiatives serve as a normal threat. Racism among civilians does not aid this growing issue, either. Not only are various police forces enforcing this level of violence upon the black community, but also heavily armed civilians much like George Zimmerman, the murderer of Trayvon Martin, often promote

a common fantasy created by the National Rifle Association (NRA)—that an armed (white) America is a safer version of America. However, highly publicized incidents such as Trayvon’s murder have launched a whole new movement; the Mothers of the Movement began to solidify their image as women connected by the unspeakable tragedy of losing a child to institutionalized violence. Lucia McBath, the mother of Jordan Davis who was killed by an intolerant 47-year old white male named Michael David Dunn over a dispute regarding the teen’s loud music, explained the goal of Mothers of the Movement at the 2016 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania:

I lived in fear my son would die like this. I even warned him because he was a young, black man, he would meet people who didn’t value his life. That is a conversation no parent should ever have to have... We’re going to keep telling our children’s stories and urging you to say their names. We’re going to keep building a future where police officers and communities of color work together in mutual respect to keep children, like Jordan, safe. (Al-Sibai, n.pg)

The Mothers of the Movement continued to be extremely present in 2015 and 2016 around the time of the Presidential Election; in fact, seven of them, including Sybrina Fulton came together in support of Democratic candidate, Hilary Clinton, believing she would be the best proponent for addressing the epidemic of police brutality. Not only did they join Clinton on the campaign trail, those, such as McBath, spoke in support of her at the 2016 DNC. (Although it should be noted that Samaria Rice, mother of Tamir Rice, supported the mothers, did not believe any of the candidates in the 2016 Presidential

Election showed an acceptable level of commitment to rectify these deeply rooted issues.)

Even though Black Lives Matter Movement has made great strides in bringing these issues to a public sphere, lives are being lost in addition to and in the wake of those lost to police brutality and a heightened surveillance state. For example, we might consider Erica Garner, daughter of Eric Garner, who died from the trauma of police violence. Twenty-seven-year-old Erica suffered a massive heart attack on Christmas Eve of 2017 and died less than a week afterward after having been mobilized to activism in the wake of her father's death. As Christen A. Smith explains in her article, *The Fallout of Police Violence is Killing Black Women like Erica Garner*, "When we think of police lethality, we typically consider the immediate body count...but these numbers do not reveal the slow death that black women experience. The long-range trauma that police brutality causes can be as deadly as a bullet. The pain of loss kills with heart attacks, strokes, depression and even anemia" (n.pg.). Whether this trauma is direct and physical, as it was for Lyles, or emotional as it is for the Mothers of the Movement, it continues to take children away from their mothers and mothers (such as Erica Garner, who had just has a baby boy in August that she named after her father) away from their children.

Although the disposability of black life continues to be a large systemic issue, the African American community always maintains their resilience. Rap legend Kendrick Lamar expresses his frustration at the disregard of young black life in his song "XXX," which was recently released on his critically acclaimed 2017 album, *DAMN*: "Ain't no Black Power when you baby killed by a coward / I can't even keep the peace, don't you fuck with one of ours." In the first line, he is reflecting upon how the loss of young

black life causes a type of disempowerment within black communities; however, as he expresses in the line immediately afterward, black parental figures—whether they are biological mothers or “othermothers”—continue to engage in methods of *strategic motherhood* due to the systems of oppression still present in modern society. Although we must recognize that much has improved since the era of slavery, there are still strides to be made when parallels can continue to be drawn between black slave women of 1850’s America and angry, saddened, and impassioned black mothers functioning in a 21st century context. However, despite all the odds against them, black communities across the U.S. continue to work together as a complex parental network to protect black children and young adults with the hope that they may prosper and succeed in the future.

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## **Vita**

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