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BEHIND THE VEIL: MOTHERING EMPOWERMENT

by

Rebecca Darby Mitchell

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

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DEDICATION

To my children, Henry, Smith, and Mae. You will always be the best part of me. Being your mother is my greatest accomplishment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking my committee: Dr. Cohoon, Dr. Menson-Furr, and Dr. Gal for their time, feedback, and encouragement.

To Dr. Mitchell, my chair and mentor, you opened my eyes to African American Literature in 2009, and I have loved it ever since. I will forever be grateful for you and the way you fueled my education.

To my mother, my editor, I guess this is proof that I will never stop needing my mother's help. I wasn't certain I would ever finish this project, but you-- you always knew I would.

Finally, to my husband, Miles, you are the image of selfless love. Your patience and encouragement throughout this process never faltered, and that made all the difference. Here's to our post dissertation years.

ABSTRACT

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As Toni Morrison states in her text, “The Site of memory,” early slave narratives were written with the purpose of providing a historical account that was representative of the race and of enticing readers to see the worth and human nature of the subjects. In doing this, Morrison notes that the authors fell short of revealing the interior life as it was often dubbed “too terrible to relate.” After examining the interior lives of the mother figures in the texts of Harriet Jacobs, Toni Morrison, Dolen Perkins-Valdez, and Valerie Martin, it becomes clear that these maternal figures were not merely reactive to an oppressive slave culture that sought to have them submit in mind, body, and spirit, but they were also driven, creative, and determined to fulfil their maternal roles despite any social constructions. Not only were they willing to subvert the master’s authority, but they were also willing to oppose the social constructions of their own race which empowered them as women and as mothers.

Jacobs uses her sexuality, which was oppressed under the cult of true womanhood and slavery, as her opportunity to lift the veil and assert herself as a dominant woman, making motherhood the tangible sign of her self-determination. In *Beloved*, patterns of maternal violence disrupted social expectations and established the authoritative power of the African American woman and mother in a new light. Love as maternal provision is explored in Perkins-Valdez’s *Wench*, in which Lizzie uses her position as concubine to initially provide for physical needs for her children and later to equip them with the knowledge and mission of abolition. Lastly, in *Property*, Valerie Martin explores the

power struggles that ensue when the white mistress is obsessed with dominating the slave woman who has taken her place in the marital bed and as the maternal figure. Sarah, unlike her white mistress, is self-empowered, seeking her own desires. Meanwhile, Manon spends her life struggling for a perceived power found in white patriarchy. Looking behind the veil reveals that each of these maternal figures emerges empowered despite adherence to the prescribed racial, social, and gender roles.

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INTRODUCTION
BEHIND THE VEIL: MOTHERING EMPOWERMENT

“Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all.”

Sethe to Paul D

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (194)

Following the death of Toni Morrison, the line above has been circulated as one of her most well-known quotations. It is surprising that a line about love would be most remembered from *Beloved*, a book focusing on a mother haunted by infanticide. However, it is this “thick,” often misunderstood love of the maternal figures that I work to reveal in all of the texts discussed in this dissertation.

As I pondered motherhood throughout this project, it became clear that love, in the traditional, affectionate sense, is not missing in the antebellum South but is disguised and possibly distorted. While the mother/child relationship is often considered, whether true or not, to be the most innate, doting, and loving relationship, it, like all life, is disrupted by the disgusting, peculiar institution of slavery. By exposing the complicated lives African American slave women inhabited, internal conflicts are revealed. These conflicts shed light on the depictions of motherhood as they are revealed in narratives and texts, making room for explanations as to why maternal figures were often misunderstood and misrepresented. As Barbara Christian states in Elaine Tuttle Hansen’s *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood*, “motherhood is the context for the slave woman’s most deeply felt conflicts.” As a result, the slave mother in American culture is often observed as powerfully present but poorly understood (Hansen

64-65). I first approached the slave mother according to Du Bois' concept of Double Consciousness. In doing so, I looked at the warring ideals of being both a slave woman and a slave mother. However, as I continued my research, I came to understand that the two ideals were in fact not at war but in unison creating a new identity: the empowered slave mother. Therefore, I looked at this new construction of mother as a position of superiority which exceeds all social and emotional expectations as she remains in pursuit of what she deems required of her position as mother. I then longed to expose her identity behind the veil, which was an understanding that she in fact had no maternal rights.

There is no question to the fact that slavery plagued slave women with struggles that were further enhanced and complicated once these women also became mothers. Slave women were often haunted by their masters's sexual advances, and were later tortured by their jealous mistresses. They were faced with the ultimatum of bringing more "property" into the world or with performing infanticide or abortion. Slave mothers learned at birth the fine line between being a mother and being powerless over one's own children. However, the paradigm does not stop here. Once the realms of slave woman and slave mother collided, women acted and reacted according to this new role as mother in which notions of family, personal identity, and physical, sexual, and emotional violence co-mingled with the ideal of African American motherhood. Although slave mothers were given few choices in life, they used their roles as women and as mothers to not only expose life behind the veil, but to also present new constructions of women, especially mothers, as empowered, self-determined, cunning, and resistant women who were an unstoppable force against oppressive powers.

As Morrison notes in her text, “The Site of Memory,” there was often a two-fold purpose behind the early slave narratives of Jacobs, Douglass, and even Equiano. Morrison says they were written to give a historical account that was representative of the race and to persuade the reader, “who is probably not black” to see the worth and human nature of the subjects (“The Site of Memory” 86). As the writers exposed these motives, Morrison claims they fell short of revealing the interior life as it was often dubbed “too terrible to relate” (90). In looking behind that veil, I longed to see that interior life of the slave mother. After examining the interior lives of the mother figures of Harriet Jacobs, Toni Morrison, Dolen Perkins-Valdez, and Valerie Martin, it became clear that they were not merely reactive to an oppressive slave culture that longed to have them submit in mind, body, and spirit, but they were driven, creative, and determined to fulfil their personal maternal roles despite all calls to conformity. Looking into the interior lives of these women reveals that they were not only willing to deny the master’s authority, but they were also often unwilling to submit to the social constructions of their own race. Their actions as mothers, though typically not socially accepted, empowered them as women and as mothers.

Slavery or white patriarchy had assigned Black womanhood to the domestic sphere as the asexual Mammy. However, Black women rebuked this notion of womanhood by becoming mothers, by choice or by consequence, and furthermore by becoming self-driven women. Researchers interested in feminist and identity struggles detail the impact of slavery upon women and the ways in which they rebelled; however, there is room for analysis specifically in the way in which motherhood is constructed by Jacobs, Morrison, Perkins-Valdez, and Martin, as the characters are willing to resist any

existing socially accepted constructions in the name of motherhood. Examples of female and maternal resistance and empowerment are found throughout the experiences of the women discussed in these texts.

Jacobs intentionally rejects the upheld moral code of womanhood that is practiced and defended by her grandmother. As Stephanie Li explains in her essay “Motherhood as Resistance in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” it is through Jacobs’s use of the flesh as both mother and slave woman that she “claims the insurgent ground of her social identity and formulates her resistance to human bondage. By emphasizing her narrator's maternal sentiments, Jacobs resists prevailing beliefs concerning black women's indifference to their children while also establishing an important association between her protagonist Linda Brent and domestic ideologies” (14). As Jacobs reconciles her expectations as a woman with her position as mother, she comes to represent motherhood as resistance.

Morrison’s Sethe enlists violence in *Beloved* that is not exemplified in the work’s other maternal figure, Baby Suggs. By utilizing violence (most often physical), Sethe is able to stop her victimization and form a rebellion and resistance to further oppression. By actively opposing their current state, Black women “can create new patterns and refuse socialized gender and racial identities that attempt to constrain them” (Putnam). This use of violence in the place of an assumed passivity creates a new picture of the Black woman and mother and allows her violence to be interpreted as love and sacrifice rather than simply as cruelty and harshness.

In Perkins-Valdez’s *Wench*, Lizzie manipulates her position as concubine to provide for her children despite popular opinion that no good can come from her

relationship with her master, Drayle. According to Lizzie, to deny Drayle was to stop providing for her children. Therefore, Lizzie is willing to sacrifice her own self-preservation in order to make sure her children are provided for and remain privileged. Although this mindset is not understood socially by Lizzie's friends at Tawawa Resort or on the plantation, it is the way in which she asserts her authority over her children. As time progresses, Lizzie becomes even more self-reliant as she is determined to use the tools of education, exposure, and determination that her relationship with Drayle has provided in order to seek the desires of her heart for her children.

Lastly, Martin's *Property* exposes the effects of Black maternal empowerment through the lens of the slaveholding mistress, Manon. Manon's continual need for increased authority over her slave, Sarah, does not deny the slave mother's empowerment, but it in fact solidifies her resistant position and spurs the white mistress's obsession with reclaiming her role as master. As attempts to regain control of and to suppress Sarah increase, Sarah remains emotionally and intellectually resistant, proving her to truly be unconquerable. Sarah reiterates the empowered maternal role of the women discussed in the texts of Jacobs, Morrison, and Perkins-Valdez as her self-identity is neither tied to Manon nor white patriarchy.

The life and role of the African American slave mother is complex and merits analysis as it creates a feminist identity specific to her position as both Black woman and mother. The women and mother figures in these texts were not simply reacting to slavery and the oppressive white powers, but they were embarking on a new identity that was neither controlled by slavery nor their own slave communities. They were acting as

individual maternal figures seeking the greatest good for their children and families despite existing social constructions, and in doing so, they displayed “thick love.”

CHAPTER 1

Motherhood and the Moral Code in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

In 1861 Harriet Jacobs wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* under the pseudonym of Linda Brent. This text would become one of the most well known and circulated slave narratives, along with Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Although notoriety is shared between the two narratives, Jacobs clearly states that her narrative has specific purpose in lifting the veil on slavery, specifically the veil regarding enslaved women. She explains, "This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility by presenting them with the veil withdrawn. I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them" (8). Jacobs's assertion marks her motive as not only exposing the suffering of all slaves, but in explicitly exposing the suffering that is endemic to female slaves. Jacobs scholar, Jean Fagan Yellin cites this narrative as the "only slave narrative that takes as its subject the sexual exploitation of female slaves—thus centering on sexual oppression as well as on oppression of race and condition" (45). Furthermore, Yellin argues that Jacobs is the "'representative' woman of the nineteenth century 'because she shap[ed] her past from a private tale of shame of a 'slave girl' into a public testimony against a tyrannical system'" (Moore 51). By focusing on the individual and the individual experience, the reader is familiarized not just with slavery, but with the personal experience and the gender roles of a slave. Jacobs depicts the hardships of the slave woman as she battles with Victorian models of womanhood

and uses unique methods to avoid further victimization. Such a view of life behind “the veil” familiarizes the reader, who is assumed to be neither Black nor Southern, to see those details that have previously been “too terrible to relate” (Morrison).

As John Blassingame writes:

...in the autobiography, more clearly than in any other source, we learn what went on in the minds of black men [sic]. It gives us a window to the “inside half” of the slave’s life which never appears in the commentaries of “outsiders.”

Autobiographers are generally so preoccupied with conflict, those things blocking their hopes and dreams, that their works give a freshness and vitality to history which is often missing in other sources. (277)

Blassingame suggests that in understanding the obstacles aimed at deterring the dreams and aspirations of slaves, then readers may also comprehend the role the individuals’ community and culture play in attaining other dreams (Beardslee 38). Therefore, slave narratives were once used to study the full nature of the institution of slavery from a pedagogical approach, but feminist theories have shifted the focus of these narratives to the slave narrator’s attempt to define him/herself in a world that is resistant to such an attempt. Therefore, an analysis into the obstacles faced by Jacobs as woman behind the veil will not only reveal oppression under slavery, but it will in greater detail depict her ability, along with help from her community, which is largely composed of other women, to emerge as an empowered woman whose journey was marked not only by unfulfilled aspirations but also by merited achievements.

Jacobs's experience with the cruelties of slavery when mixed with the idealized notion of true womanhood reveals a new window into suffering of women that is not shared to the same degree in the slave narratives of others such as Douglass. Douglass, like countless others, as explained by Morrison in "The Site of Memory," hides behind literary conventions of the day when faced with the heinous and harsh realities of slavery. Douglass diverts attention: "But let us now leave the rough usage of the field...and turn our attention to the less repulsive slave life as it existed in the house of my childhood" (Morrison 91). However, in *Incidents*, Jacobs not only rips the veil off of slavery through her revelation of the sexual atrocities suffered as a woman, but she also constructs an image of womanhood and motherhood that is loving while also self-determined. Jacobs's narrative exposes the sexual bondage of women in slavery as a window into the concealed reality of female oppression. As a slave woman is conscious of her exclusion from the ability to meet the traditional demands of the cult of true white womanhood that included piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness, Jacobs constructs a new image of woman that encompasses her as female, slave, and mother. Carby argues in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, that "Jacobs must contend with conventions which, as they promote female chastity and submissiveness, deny her experience, her femininity, and, by extension, her humanity" (Nudelman 939). I would argue that Jacobs uses her sexuality, which was oppressed under the cult of true womanhood and slavery, as her opportunity to lift the veil and assert herself as a dominant woman. Motherhood becomes the tangible sign of Jacobs's self-determination. Jacobs exposes the "proceedings too terrible to relate" by airing the "interior life" of a female slave under the cult of true womanhood, and Motherhood becomes the tangible sign of Jacobs's emergence from

behind the veil. The inability to remain in one definition of womanhood, which was reserved for the Victorian white woman, and the ability to modify those exclusive definitions of womanhood marks Jacobs's insistence to create a new sphere of black womanhood as slave and as mother.

Jacobs's text explores the complicated plight of the slave woman in the lives of the Pseudonymous Linda Brent and Brent's freed maternal grandmother, Aunt Martha, often referred to as Aunt "Marthy." Upon introduction to Aunt Martha, the reader is quickly made aware of her respected status and character. Much of Aunt Martha's acclaim is based upon her success of upholding the Victorian ideals of true womanhood, if the term were applicable to black women. Despite her exclusion, Aunt Martha is a pillar of her community and family and is said to be respected due to her intelligence and good character (Jacobs 21). At other times, she is the moral matriarch and the dominating maternal image as the one to whom Jacobs credits her comforts both spiritual and temporal (19). Following the death of Jacobs's mother, Aunt Martha promises to be a mother to her grandchildren, "so far as she might be permitted to do so" (18). Aunt Martha's asexual nature is depicted from her introduction as an image of morality. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in her text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, qualities are attached to these images of womanhood that are used to justify that oppression (Collins 7). In order to enable the restriction of Black women to domestic work, Collins describes the use of the "mammy image" as a means to evaluate and enforce a dominant perception of the ideal Black female in relation to White patriarchy (72). The "mammy figure," asexual and unattractive, represents gender and race oppression. She cares more for the white children

than for her own in order to conform to the intended nature of “woman.” According to Carby, “the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perception of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power.

Aunt Martha’s inclusion into this dominant perception of black womanhood is reinforced throughout the text as Brent recalls her grandmother nursing multiple children despite color or status. Brent’s own mother was even weaned three months early in order to allow for her white foster sister to nurse from Aunt Martha. The white foster sister dies, but her sister grows into the “jealous mistress,” Mrs. Flint. Following the moral code of the mammy shaped not only Aunt Martha’s interactions with others, but it also shaped a new construction of another type of woman and mother. If Aunt Martha was the closest symbol of true womanhood for the black lady in Jacobs’ text, then those, such as Jacobs, who did not continue to behave like her were constructed as the sexually insatiable black woman.

While a juxtaposition of the young Linda Brent (Jacobs) and Aunt Martha reveals a possible rejection of the role of the domestic, pure, submissive, and pious woman in the cult of true womanhood, deeper analysis into the motives and decisions made by Brent depicts a woman who is more self-determined than one who simply rejects an existing ideal of womanhood. Carby calls Jacobs’s narrative “the most sophisticated, sustained narrative dissection of the conventions of true womanhood by a black author before emancipation” (47). She explains that rather than failing as woman, Jacobs undermines the conventional notions of true womanhood by revealing the slave woman as intelligent and virtuous who acts heroically in control of her own life (Andrews 441). This reading contradicts the negative images of black women as highly sexual, insensitive, complicit

women who were perpetuated in male slave narratives and abolitionist literature.

Therefore, Jacobs's exposure of life behind the veil exposes the inner life of the slave woman in a new light.

Unlike Douglass, Brent's initial unawareness of her position as slave presents her as a blank slate. She begins, "When I was six years old, my mother died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave" (Jacobs 14). Douglass begins his narrative as a slave unaware of his humanity. Such experiences continue to unravel the complexity of life for the female slave. Jacobs immediately finds herself bound to a slave system in which she is powerless to uphold the moral codes of womanhood, yet still expected to act within that system. As a result, this task of operating within a code of womanhood that does not recognize one as woman becomes increasingly complex for Linda as she concludes that "Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women"(119).

While Douglass and countless other narratives recount the physical beatings in their narratives, Jacobs extends the hand of slavery to women's bodies. Although Jacobs was never severely beaten or mercilessly overworked, her suffering is severe and commonplace for a slave girl. As Jones notes in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, "As broodmare or concubine, or wet nurse or mammy, part of a slave woman's productive work was reproduction" (5). In Jacobs's description of the sexual advances made by Dr. Flint, she, for the first time, reveals the personal and intimate sector of a woman's life that slavery is allowed to invade. It is this sexual aspect of the slave woman's "inner life" that is continuously neither warmly accepted in conversation nor easily reconciled with the cult of true womanhood.

Until the age of twelve, Jacobs had learned the way of and had been indoctrinated into the knowledge of Victorian womanhood. Upon her mother's death, Jacobs notes that onlookers "all spoke kindly of my dead mother, who had been a slave merely in name, but in nature was noble and womanly" (14). Here, Jacobs' mother is specifically described as womanly, a humanizing term rarely applied to slaves based on sex alone, so it may be implied that she was a woman in behavior and in her adherence to the prescribed notions of womanhood. Her previous mistress exhibited religious piety in that she had taught Jacobs the nature of God's Word and that she was "to love thy neighbor as thyself" (16). The recounting of her mother's reputation as a "woman," her grandmother's traditional morality, and the Godly nature of her deceased mistress are just a few of the factors that support a reading of Jacobs as having been fully indoctrinated into the cult of true womanhood as far as knowledge and education are concerned. As Sherman notes, "The ideology of woman's innate 'piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity could be a significant weapon against male aggression, but it also opened new areas of vulnerability" (70). Reconciling these characteristics of womanhood in the midst of Flint's sexual advances causes Jacobs to act in a way that neither fits a category of submission nor rebellion. In *The Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois addresses the hypocritical moral agent in light of double consciousness. He explains, "What white America may value as moral integrity puts African American hypocritical moral agents at a disadvantage due to the two selves. In the double-consciousness of the hypocritical moral agent, the white self reigns in ways that suppresses and oppresses the African American self" (Crozier 80). As a result, Jacobs is placed in a position where any sign of confidence or self-assertion would create unfavorable consequences as a slave; however,

entering willingly into any sexual relationship with Dr. Flint would violate another code: womanhood. This window into the life of a slave girl parts the veil as Jacobs must forge her own way in order to be true to herself. Sherman argues that pure, neighborly, and ego-less love, and not the nineteenth-century vision of womanhood, becomes the real image of true sisterhood and brotherhood, and Jacobs's work exposes a maternal love that is true in a non-traditional way (185).

The role of the mother is introduced long before Jacobs becomes a mother herself. It is actually with the loss of the maternal figures in early life that she is forced to face her own reality as a slave girl. She became aware of her position as a slave following the death of her mother at age six, and then she became aware of her new reality at a slave girl following the death of her mistress, who was like a mother to her. When Jacobs finds that she is not granted freedom as her late mother was promised by her mistress, she is bequeathed to Emily Flint, her mistress' five year old niece. It is in this transaction that Jacobs is reminded that although she was taught to love her neighbor as herself, she was certainly excluded from such behavior, and was not regarded as neighbor. These glimpses into Jacobs's life not only provide information regarding her struggles, but they also split the veil to reinforce the problem with the standing definition of womanhood as white women deliberately resist true Christian piety. Like Douglass, Jacobs notes the way in which her white master and mistress manipulate Christianity in order to suit their own needs. However, unlike Douglass, Jacobs's account of her mother's mistress shows that not only did she deny her Christian obligation to love her neighbor, but this rejection was also contrary to the cult of true womanhood. However, the standard of womanhood suited the needs of the white woman while it condemned the black woman. In hindsight

these instances not only reinforce the powerless nature of a slave, as Douglass would note, but they also highlight the upcoming events in which Jacobs has the ability to make choices that can both empower and destroy her reputation as a woman.

At first glance, Jacobs's hardships, following the loss of her mother and mistress, are predominately the result of sexual advances by Dr. Flint, Jacobs's mistress's father. However, in her first fourteen years, Jacobs seems to rely upon those conventional notions of womanhood. In conversations with her brother, William, she urges him, along with herself, to just do right in order to find happiness. She determines, "We must be good; perhaps that would bring us contentment" (30). As she explains the value of moral behavior and forgiveness that was instilled at an early age, she also foreshadows her own inability to be conquered by Dr. Flint under the cunning guise of morality. Dr. Flint complicates the only moral code of femininity Jacobs was taught, and he continues to complicate Jacobs's life when she tells her story. Jacobs reveals that slavery, though terrible, produces consequences that extend beyond the physical abuse that is obvious. Slavery enters the "interior life" of a slave woman and taints the moral, sexual, and familial realm of a woman's life.

"But I now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl" (Jacobs 44). It is at this point in time that Jacobs crosses from childhood into womanhood, and this transition into womanhood is marked by supreme sadness. The world in which Jacobs finds herself is not just a world of slavery, but it is also a world of corruption in that while piety and purity may be the socially expected outward symbols of womanhood, they can also be the means by which personal empowerment and resistance are destroyed. This transition into womanhood marks a new identity for Jacobs as she is

no longer focusing on the traditional hardships of plantation life as noted by abolitionist writers, but she is now concerned with specific sexual encounters that were not to be spoken of at the time. Jacobs's inclusion of these sexual advances into her text also reveals the emergence of sexual jealousy in her mistress. Sherman notes, "If the serpent enters the slave girl's life at puberty, he enters her white sister's at marriage. Unchecked power and sexual exploitation make betrayal by her husband almost inevitable" (182). However, the ability to keep a depiction of the black woman as an overtly sexual temptress with animalistic sexuality made way to absolve the white male of his sexual exploitation of black females. Hazel Carby explains:

A basic assumption of the principles underlying the cult of true womanhood was the necessity of the white female to "civilize" the baser instincts of man. But in the face of what was constructed as the overt sexuality of the black female, excluded as she was from the parameters of virtuous possibilities, these baser male instincts were entirely uncontrolled. Thus the white slave master was not regarded as being responsible for his actions toward his black female slaves. On the contrary, it was the female slave who was held responsible for being a potential, and direct, threat to the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress. (27)

While Carby's assertion explains the projected view of the black female slaves, it does not explain what is made to be of her role as a woman. Though not without guilt, Jacobs rejects a submissive identity as a sexual temptress to Flint. As Dr. Flint's sexual advances continue toward Jacobs following puberty, some critics have likened the text to a conventional seduction novel and have questioned the influence of Jacobs' white editor, Lydia Maria Child's, on the text based on the plot and language. However, Yellin's

research holds Jacobs as the original author and explains the words and story are a “result of Linda’s own education in genteel codes of female behavior” (Sherman 171). In one instance, Jacobs even apologizes for using such plain language in detailing Dr. Flint’s sexual advances, as if such talk was not appropriate to be used by a true southern woman (67). Such conversations reinforce Jacobs’ awareness of the expected behavior codes for women in both her role as a woman and as a writer re-telling her own story. Because Jacobs notes in her introduction that her story is aimed at educating white audiences as to what exists for the slave woman behind the veil, it is important to note that Jacobs is trying to appear pleasing to the dominant white culture of womanhood while simultaneously creating her own identity (Kaiser 100).

Jacobs’s role as a woman was shaped as a direct result of her interactions with Dr. Flint, and it is in these accounts of his sexual advances that Jacobs attempts to reveal the inner life and the details of slavery that have been “too terrible to relate” (Morrison 91). She recounts that had it not been “for *him* I might have been a virtuous, free, and happy wife,” (91). Dr. Flint’s sexual advancements toward Jacobs worked directly to corrupt the ideals of womanhood and morality as instilled by her grandmother and other women. Jacobs’s beauty became her greatest curse, outside of the institution of slavery, and Dr. Flint’s unwillingness to treat her like the woman she was raised to know, but never become, created a sense of guilt and internal warring.

In slavery, the values of true womanhood become inverted by the cult of true womanhood: “If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens degradation of the female slave” (Jacobs 28). Flint’s advances also create a divide between Jacobs and her

grandmother. The two are no longer women of the same code as Jacobs is now, although through no volition of her own, involved in the impure and unladylike world of immoral and unladylike sexuality with Dr. Flint. Ideologically separated from her grandmother and the object of jealousy for her mistress, Jacobs finds herself in a new facet of life driven by self-determination. On multiple occasions, Jacobs desires to go to her grandmother, but the shame associated with her experiences stop her. “Then, although my grandmother was all in all to me, I feared her as well as loved her. I had been accustomed to look up to her with a respect bordering awe. I was very young, and felt shamefaced about telling her such impure things” (46). As a result, Jacobs presents the dilemma of living as a slave girl and as an attractive woman according to the code of true womanhood. Therefore, Jacobs makes a decision to become a mother. She understands both her position as an object of Dr. Flint’s desire and her ability to create resistance by choosing her own means of motherhood. This decision to voluntarily become a mother directly conflicts her master’s will and her grandmother’s values; however, there were few choices for the slave (Sherman 172). As Gloria T. Randle explains, choosing Sands allows Brent to make a choice and is the difference between “passive resignation and proactive rebellion” (49). This dilemma between the problem Jacobs faces with Flint’s sexual advances and her position as a woman causes the position to become what Faith Pullen terms “double jeopardy.” Pullen explains that black women face the “painful condition of double jeopardy, the double strain of being a woman in a sexist society and a black in a racist one” (178). The conflicting views of womanhood continue to resurface between Jacobs and her grandmother once she becomes a mother.

As Jacobs faces physical and psychological trauma, she acknowledges her compromised position as woman and the fact that her master will have his way with her. Jacobs understood she was destined for early motherhood, but she also knew her reality in the maternal world: she would be denied all rights and privileges. She even clarifies for the reader that “If we had children...they must ‘follow the condition of the mother’” (Jacobs 51). The only true love interest Jacobs discussed was for a free black carpenter. However, once denied the option to marry, considering slave marriage had no legal binding, Jacobs’s only true love interests remained among those with whom she had familial bonds: Aunt Martha, Aunt Nancy, Phillip, and her children. Therefore, Jacobs presents the struggle between submission to Dr. Flint and intentional rebellion against the code of womanhood by explaining that having children meant submitting them to the world of slavery and the physical and psychological trauma in which she existed as the prey of her master’s sexual advances and the subject of her mistress’s jealousy. In order to combat the sexual approaches and her mistress’ rage, Brent seeks motherhood outside of marriage and her master’s home as a form of self-determination and resistance.

While Dr. Flint’s sexual aggression increases, his appeal is often grounded in the “Victorianization of female desire in the nineteenth-century’s cult of true womanhood” (Moore 42). Flint talks of Jacobs’s disgrace that she had caused her family by becoming a single mother and refers to her as a “lady” and a “virtuous madam” and offers her a home of [her] own (Jacobs 56,119). This flattery of the chance at a sentimental domestic life is rejected by Jacobs, but it is rooted in the ideal that white southern ladies aspired to achieve. Jacobs already recognized her exclusion from such a system, and as Claudia Tate remarks, these domestic ideals and desires are what Jacobs’s text are built upon.

Tate also argues that Jacobs “depicted freedom not simply as an escape from the political condition of slavery, but as the gaining of access to the social institutions of motherhood, family, and home” (27). Jacobs forfeits her chastity in order to retain her dignity.

Aunt Martha addresses the “impure” relationship that existed between Dr. Flint and Jacobs when “She had told him pretty plainly what she thought of his character, and there was considerable gossip in the neighborhood about our affairs” (82). However, Aunt Martha’s approach to attack Flint’s character is ineffective as it could only be successful if Dr. Flint also operated under the same code of womanhood and morality as Aunt Martha. This is further proven when Flint offers Jacobs “one more chance to redeem your character” (62). Character is of importance to Aunt Martha, and Flint sees himself able to speak to Jacobs through a word valued in true womanhood. Each time the term is used, it is considered to be of value to the woman. Later, Aunt Martha’s tone is much more authoritative when she encounters Flint in chapter 15. Dr. Flint is angry to find Rose, one of his ex-slaves in Martha’s home. As a result, Jacobs explains that he “gave me the blow that would have fallen upon Rose if she had still been his slave” (125). The loud noises and commotion summon Aunt Martha home, and she exclaims, “Get out of my house! Go home, and take care of your wife and children, and you will have enough to do, without watching my family” (125). The direct nature of this confrontation differs from Aunt Martha’s pleading to Dr. Flint based on character. The difference that might be inferred here in Aunt Martha’s response is that this exchange occurs within Aunt Martha’s home, her domestic sphere, which would be a traditional sphere in which a Victorian woman under the cult of true womanhood might have been

empowered. Jacobs, unable to own her own sphere in the form of a home, asserted her body as the domain over which she would have total physical control.

It is Jacobs's body that is transformed throughout the text to grant her freedom. Her body is first the object of Dr. Flint's control when he will not allow her to marry the "young colored carpenter" she loved. Jacobs explained that she "loved him with all the ardor of a young girl's first love" but was not allowed to marry him as her mistress, like most other slave owners, "seemed to think that slaves had no right to any family ties of their own" (59). After denying Jacobs's body as property, on the basis of love, Dr. Flint later vowed to take control of her body for his own sexual pleasures. Although painful, having children with her master would have been accepted. It is Jacobs's refusal to submit that creates questions regarding her morality and womanhood. Later, it is the body that Jacobs's struggles to hide in her grandmother's garret, and finally, it is Jacobs's disguised body that allows her to proceed to physical freedom. Therefore, while domesticity was a model of womanhood for the Victorian woman, the physical body became the domestic sphere over which Jacobs had the ability to house her children and secure freedom for herself and for her children.

Jacobs admits she wanted to keep herself pure, and "under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon slavery" (84). Jacobs consistently reminds the reader not only of her own circumstances but also that her experiences are directly tied to the Edenton slave community and to slavery at large. She was alienated from womanhood, was wrestling with slavery, and was understanding that "the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible" (85). As

Yellin asserts, “Jacobs, realizing the inevitability of single motherhood, had cunningly selected the white attorney to father her children” (Moore 47). Upon making her decision to become pregnant, Jacobs asks, “Who can blame slaves for being cunning? They are constantly compelled to resort to it. It is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants” (154). Therefore, Jacobs continuously employs her body, a sign of her femininity, which was the origin of Flint’s problematic desire to become a positive mechanism in asserting her dominance as a woman.

While explaining her choice to become a mother to her genteel audience, Jacobs states, “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” (85). In making this distinction, Jacobs shifts the definition of morality and femininity to the nature of choice regarding the relationship (Sherman 172). As a result, Jacobs makes a way for herself as a moral mother, despite all she has experienced, in a new code of true womanhood. This distinction is important as it shows the conflicted nature between being a woman and now being a mother, all while being a slave. Jacobs acknowledges the challenges that she has faced and the fact that only slave women are required to face the challenges. She bravely takes responsibility for her decision to become a mother on her own terms: “I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation. But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely” (82). When Jacobs is denied the purity and piety of womanhood, she has a renewed reliance on her true self. She clings to self-empowerment and self-

determination. The ability to choose for one's self becomes the way for Jacobs to direct her own womanhood, which becomes defined in terms of her abilities as a mother. Unable to ignore her impending sexual encounters with Flint and awaited impregnation, Jacobs chooses the route with Sands, allowing the empowered slave woman the most power possible. In making this decision, Moore points out in "Maternal Metaphors" that Jacobs defied Southern law, which was designed to strip her of her maternal, natural, and physical rights. This experience highlighted the way in which the moral agency of a slave woman is constrained in both public and private spheres.

However, Aunt Martha, still operating under the Victorian fiction of manners, does not see Jacobs' pregnancy in the same progressive light. Upon learning of Jacobs's pregnancy, Aunt Martha erupts, "I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother. She tore from my fingers my mother's wedding ring and her silver thimble. 'Go away'" (87). Randle discusses the psychological effect these actions had upon Jacobs in that "repossessing important familial artifacts, the grandmother does incalculable damage to the young girl's sense of self. The reclamation of the mother's ring symbolically tears mother from daughter once again, underlining Brent's motherlessness" (51). The loss of her mother's wedding ring marks her immorality and exclusion from a female moral code to have a child without a husband, and the loss of her grandmother's thimble, a sign of domesticity, severs her "female kinship from the security of domestic asylum" (Randle 51). Therefore, as Carby shows in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, that black women were excluded from the dominant definitions of womanhood and that white women "allied themselves not with black women but with a racist patriarchal order against all black people," new problems

existed among black women who acted in order to change life behind the veil (7). Jacobs remembers the closing of the gate as a “sound I never heard before” (87-88). It is important to note the way in which Aunt Martha copes with Jacobs’s pregnancy as it reiterates the different moral codes by which each is governed. Aunt Martha has been depicted as being pious and submissive in her view of slavery as “God’s will,” and she is the image of domesticity in her provision of Jacobs’s comforts, “spiritual and temporal” (56). However, it is to be noted that Jacobs’s mother, like her father, was a mulatto. This information made available in the introduction of her narrative makes it clear that Aunt Martha, like Jacobs, had experienced “the usual fate” of slave girls (Randle 51). Aunt Martha’s rejection of Jacobs for refusing to act as expected behind the veil further divides the two women. Although later pitied and embraced again by her grandmother, the closing of that gate at her little house signals the closing of a way of life for Jacobs. Her path from adolescence to young adulthood has been a tangle of love, loss, slavery, and indoctrination into an impossible womanhood. These systems of belief and life have proven fickle, and now Jacobs enters a new realm of life as a mother. According to the true cult of womanhood, it would have been better for Jacobs’s character to have acted more like Frances Harpers’ character Iola in *Iola Leroy* than to have chosen such an immoral role as an unwed mother.

Harper, like Jacobs, wrote during the Victorian era, a period in history obsessed with morality. While Jacobs chooses a preferred sexual partner in Mr. Sands, a young white lawyer with whom she has her two children, this still broke with ideals for morality and womanhood. Choosing to preserve dignity over chastity was not a more acceptable path. Instead, Harper’s Iola Leroy, was the image of womanhood as she was described as

“refined and ladylike,” with her light skin, long hair, and blue eyes (Harper). As a woman of the club movement, Harper was dedicated to creating the counter image to the hypersexual black woman of history. In image and profession, Iola, unlike Jacobs, is the answer to the calling of true womanhood for the black woman and is the ideal embodiment of the club movement. She is the daughter of a white man and a black woman. With her white skin, Iola is raised believing she is white and identifies with the slave-holding white class. However, when her father dies, she learns the truth that Jacobs could never forget: that slave children follow the mother. As a result, Iola is remanded to slavery. Like Jacobs, Harper’s work speaks an abolitionist discourse and is aimed at a white audience. As a result, she, too, targets the dominant culture and its ideals while attempting to create uplift. Barbara Christian explains, “By creating a respectable ideal heroine, according to the norms of the time, Harper was addressing not herself, black women or black people, but her (white) countrymen” (234). Because of this, Harper is accused of perpetuating the stereotype of the black woman by making Iola Leroy white skinned. It is not Iola’s marriage or profession that make her ladylike, it is her physical appearance. Such a reading continues the exclusion of the dark-skinned black woman from womanhood. However, Iola marries and lives according to the cult of true womanhood in her roles as wife and as Sunday school teacher. While Jacobs was intent on exposing the supremely personal injustices suffered by and the empowerment gained by slave women, Harper’s text comes at a time when black women had “effectively repressed---in literature, at least---this sexual portion of their identity” (Kaiser102). Concubinage is only hinted at in Harper’s text as slave Tom Anderson gives an account of an advance made toward Iola on one occasion:

One day when he com'd down to breakfast,' he chukled her under de chin, an' tried to put his arm roun' her waist. But she jis' frew it off like a chunk ob fire. She looked like a snake had bit her. Her eyes fairly spit fire. Her face got red ez blood, an' den she turned so pale I thought she war gwine to faint, but she didn't an I yered her say, 'I'll die fust.' (Harper 258)

Unlike Jacobs, Harper answers according to the cult of true womanhood. She would rather die than lose her purity. On multiple occasions, Jacobs wishes for death for herself and even for her children, however, it is always freedom to be a mother that she values most. Jacobs does not choose “ladylike martyrdom” because it does not produce freedom for her children. Jacobs’s life is one that is characterized by choices. She chooses freedom for her children, and that depends upon her strength and self-determination rather than her ability to submit to genteel images of womanhood. As Sherman notes, “When Linda thinks of her daughter, and what she herself ‘had suffered in slavery at her age,’ her ‘heart was like a tiger’s when a hunter tries to seize her young.’ Moral action, and moral resistance, demand selfhood” (178).

As Carby suggests in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Jacob’s motherhood conferred new knowledge and power (60). Jacobs had taken advantage of choice, which empowered her greatly, but she simultaneously shows the tumultuous nature that even empowered decisions create as she “shed bitter tears that I was no longer worthy of being respected by the good and pure. Alas! Slavery still held me in its poisonous grasp. There was no chance for me to be respectable” (117). This battle of lost womanhood and empowered motherhood continues to rage once Flint learns of Jacobs’ pregnancy. When he is first made aware of the pregnancy, he summons Jacobs to his house. When she

arrives, he cuts every hair close to her head, as if to strip her of her womanhood all over again. Yellin explains that this act of furiously cutting Jacobs hair “is a result of the nineteenth-century symbol of the status of the woman as a whore (Moore 40). However, it is the fact that Jacobs is not *his* whore that creates his rage and total loss of self-control. Such an understanding supports a reading of Jacobs’s pregnancy as a tool of her empowerment to restore herself, reclaiming rights to her body that Southern plantation law worked to remove behind the veil.

As Jacobs chronicles her journey into and through motherhood, she constantly keeps the events tied to the larger setting of slavery and plantation life. She explains, “I like a straightforward course, and am always reluctant to resort to subterfuges. So far as my ways have been crooked, I charge them all upon slavery. It was that system of violence and wrong which now left me no alternative but to act a falsehood” (Jacobs 251). In making such claims, Jacobs explains that her actions do not act in isolation and are largely the result of life and slavery around her. By revisiting the absurdities of slavery, Jacobs is able to explain her extreme behavior. As Moore explains, “Jacobs engages in actions that outside of slavery would be perceived as the neurotic reversal of responsible maternal work: fostering the preservation and care of children and the community. Almost everyone connected to Jacobs’s secret hiding place—from her children to her grandmother to her white benefactor---is endangered” (54). Therefore, slavery excluded Jacobs from traditional notions of womanhood, but its madness also permitted Jacobs a version of motherhood that is only able to exist and thrive due to the peculiar institution.

Mr. Sands describes Jacobs's hiding in the "nine feet long and seven wide" garret above her grandmother's house as the "height of madness; however, Yellin addresses Sands's madness as being not far from Jacobs's, as he was her lover, her children's father, her brother's master, and her master's friend (Moore 55). Jacobs repeatedly refers to Sands's role as a father as "a parental relation," showing that the heart and all human biological bonds are corrupted under the hand of slavery. Therefore, "If the perversion of human relations appears in the white father who sells his child into oppression; the ennobling of human relations appears in the black mother who nurtures the child of her oppressor" (Sherman 179). It is the exposure of this claim time and time again that subjects the readers to what Morrison calls the "proceedings too terrible to relate." The time Jacobs spent in her grandmother's garret did not go without having an impact on Jacobs's role as a mother, nor does it go without having an impact on all who are around her. Such an analysis shows the total affliction of slavery on an entire community. It also allows the reader to view Jacobs's lengthy stay of seven years in the attic, though away from her children, as the ultimate act of motherly love in the most unnatural world. As a result, Jacobs's resistance from her oppressor has repercussions on all who exist around her.

Jacobs's decision to become a mother not only empowered her with a choice, but it also created a newness in her as her life was "bound up in my children" (155). They became her source of life, and they also became her source of real happiness. "I heard the old doctor's threats, but they no longer had the same power to trouble me. The darkest cloud that hung over my life had rolled away. Whatever slavery might do to me, it could not shackle my children" (Jacobs 166). The freedom of her children had become

her own freedom, and her children, the product of the worst part of her life had produced the happiest emotions of her adult life. Motherhood, which had closed the door on any possibility for Jacobs to be initiated into true womanhood, had been a source of regeneration. Moore explains:

If Jacobs had died in the garret, her cell would have emerged, figuratively as an example of the stillbirth of the maternal womb, which is instead the miraculous font of life. Her problem with her womb can be related to the constriction of her physical body, and this imprisonment is a reminder of slavery's debilitating impact on motherhood physically and emotionally. (55)

However, Jacobs does not die in her grandmother's garret, so her experience there becomes symbolic of her own incubation and her maternal labor. Motherhood is Jacobs's livelihood, and her mother figure, Aunt Martha, has provided her this incubatory period in the safe haven of her home.

The garret no longer solely symbolizes a period of waiting, but it is also a time of growth and productivity. The pains experienced in the garret are the pains of motherhood and they bear fruit for Jacobs. While she is able to see and hear the children from her hiding, there was not reciprocity. "Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children's faces, and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the while to say, 'Your mother is here.'" Still, all the while, Jacobs prayer that God would "restore me to my children, and enable me to be a useful woman and a good mother!" (202). Jacobs realizes that although life in the garret connects her with her maternal figure, Aunt Martha, she also concludes that she cannot be a mother to her children so long as she

seeks refuge in this childlike state. Jacobs' seven year confinement produces physical and emotional anguish. "My friends feared I should become a cripple for life; and I was so weary of my long imprisonment that, had it not been for the hope of serving my children, I should have been thankful to die; but, for their sakes, I was willing to bear on" (Jacobs 192). Her physical body experiences the pains of growth while in the symbolic womb. Because Jacobs' life does not end in the garret, and it is symbolic of maternal labor, then the end product is her own self re-birth. The first time Jacobs chose birth, it was with Sands, a white man. However, this time, she chose birth and she did it herself. Time spent in the garret comes to be the middle ground for a multitude of opposing forces. It is the shelter that protects her from physical harm and emotional pain, and to leave it is to abandon safety. "I felt very sad at leaving forever that old homestead, where I had been sheltered so long by the dear old grandmother; where I had dreamed my first young dream of love; and where, after that had faded away, my children came to twine themselves so closely round my desolate heart" (Jacobs 235). As a result, when she emerges, Jacobs's ability to deceive Dr. Flint and all of Edenton and successfully resurface in the north is re-emergence and empowerment, not in the lens of a black Madonna or as the result of double jeopardy, but as her strongest form: a mother, a woman who chose. Jacobs will not finish out her days on the plantation as her mother, Aunt Nancy, or even her grandmother. Instead, she will emerge from the plantation not only as a woman but also as an accomplished mother.

Sands's discussion of the madness possessed in order for Jacobs to remain in Edenton marks a new understanding of Jacobs. While he sees her hiding as "the height of madness for me to be there; that we should certainly all be ruined," provides a new

look at Jacobs and her ability to make choices (Jacobs 191). While Jacobs's stay in the garret was characterized as madness in the eyes of a man, it was more likely her exertion of and emergence of her choice and power against an oppressive system that surprised him most. In this exchange, Sands attempts to reveal the madness of a woman and mother, but he instead further uncovers the madness that is slavery and his willingness to uphold that madness. This is later solidified when he did not provide Ellen with the promised education. Aunt Martha's demeanor is also changed when she learns that Linda has risked being discovered in order to discuss the freedom of her children in a conversation with Sands. She tells Jacobs, "You've done wrong; but I can't blame you" (192). The two, who were once divided by traditional womanly expectations and Victorian morality, are now united women in this final construction of African American femininity and femaleness as mother.

Though Jacobs does escape to the North and eventually secures the freedom of her children, she is not free from the struggles endured behind the veil. She finds that the same Victorian standards of womanhood exist in the North, and she recognizes her continued exclusion. Upon her arrival to Philadelphia, Jacobs recalls meeting Mr. Durham:

On the way, Mr. Durham observed that I had spoken to him of a daughter I expected to meet; that he was surprised, for I looked so young he had taken me for a single woman. He was approaching a subject on which I was extremely sensitive. He would ask me about my husband next, I thought, and if I answered him truly, what would he think of me? (244)

In answering honestly that she has two children and no husband, Jacobs is warned: “don’t answer every body so openly. It might give some heartless people a pretext for treating you with contempt” (244). This warning in the first moments of reaching freedom reveals the fact that slavery and its details “too terrible to relate” will attempt to enslave her again. However, Jacobs’s bold assertion regarding her role as a single mother is the first glance at what freedom truly offers Jacobs. Though Jacobs remains sensitive to her status as a single mother, freedom has not only allowed her to escape the confines of slavery, but she now has hope to enter into the social institutions of motherhood, home, and family that she had previously been denied (Moore 43).

Jacobs is similarly reminded of the slave woman’s expected position once she reaches freedom when she details the difficulty with which she shares her story. Though it is difficult to share the “inner life” of a woman who works to navigate the public and private spheres with morality, Jacobs determines that she will not willingly hide behind the veil, and as a result, she will not hide her story. Jacobs’s image as a woman did not necessarily turn out with her sitting in a home with her children, but her children are free and she is now the embodiment of the image of a woman who is able to raise a baby and be in control of her sexuality. Jacobs’s decision to have children with Sands, to resist Dr. Flint, to hide in order to secure freedom for her children, and finally, her freedom as a mother chronicle her journey from victim of emotional and sexual exploitation to dominant woman. As a result, Jacobs’s narrative becomes the final redirection of her powerlessness into a dominant woman. Jacobs’s first step toward becoming a mother, despite physical and emotional consequences based on idealized notions of womanhood was her first step towards redirecting her powerlessness in the face of oppression.

As Stephanie Li explains in her essay “Motherhood as Resistance in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” it is through Jacobs’s use of the flesh as both mother and slave woman that she “claims the insurgent ground of her social identity and formulates her resistance to human bondage. By emphasizing her narrator's maternal sentiments, Jacobs resists prevailing beliefs concerning black women's indifference to their children while also establishing an important association between her protagonist Linda Brent and domestic ideologies” (14). As Jacobs reconciles the duality of womanhood, she comes to represent motherhood as empowerment and resistance. Jacobs’s narrative is one in which motherhood empowers a woman rather than a tale that displays the perversion of motherhood by slavery.

Carby addresses the domestic and social exclusion of black women and the way in which they reconstructed these ideologies to produce new definitions of womanhood. Carby asserts in “White Woman Listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood” that the concepts of family, reproduction and patriarchy, which are central to feminist theory, become problematic when applied to black women as opposed to white middle class Western women (Carby 48). Carby’s work, *Reconstructing Womanhood* reveals Jacobs’s marginalization from dominant culture and offers new images of black female experience (Nudelman 940). Nudelman argues that this is just the beginning of what sets Jacobs’s text apart from other narratives in that “Caught between a domestic ideology that relies on female sexual purity and an abolitionist discourse that insistently publicizes the sexual victim- ization of slave women, Jacobs is peculiarly able to elaborate on their interrelatedness, the ways they concur and conflict, and their particular limitations for the narration of black female experience” (942). However, I would argue

that it is Jacobs' role as a mother that makes this possible. The problem between what Jacobs refers to as her immorality is never quite conceded to her role as a slave mother; however, Jacobs resolves that happiness and value do not exist in one's ability to embrace the values of the dominant culture but in one's ability to create her own identity based on race and gender.

CHAPTER 2

Empowerment through Maternal Violence in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Like Harriet Jacobs's protagonist, Linda Brent, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Toni Morrison's mother figure Sethe also takes the historically masculine role of escaped slave. Sethe, mother of four, is faced with the decision of what to do when presented with the impending reality of being captured in the free state of Ohio and being sent back into slavery after some twenty-eight days of freedom. The violence associated with Morrison's mother characters remains a rich point of discussion. Examining the mother figures in *Beloved*, and their historical and familial circumstances, makes room for an understanding and interpretation of their actions that is based solely upon their roles as mothers. Because each woman in *Beloved* is subjected to rape or other forms of physical and psychological torture in their oppressive environments, Amanda Putnam argues that Morrison's characters often turn to violence. By enlisting violence (most often physical), the mother figures are able to stop their victimization and form a rebellion against and resistance to further oppression. By actively opposing their current state, black women "can create new patterns and refuse socialized gender and racial identities that attempt to constrain them" (Putnam). This use of violence in the place of an assumed passivity creates a new picture of the black woman and mother. Therefore, the slave mothers in Morrison's text employ violence as a form of empowerment. Sethe's social construction as a harsh and rash woman will in fact be re-evaluated as maternal violence becomes the means through which the greatest form of love and sacrifice is expressed.

Orlando Patterson argues, according to Christopher Peterson, that “Slavery destroys slave kinship structures” (549). Morrison proves this to be the case in *Beloved*, in which Sethe, Baby Suggs, Denver, Beloved, Paul D, and the others become a collective identity as those who both survived the journey to freedom and who struggle to reconstruct their lives in their newfound freedom. This collective identity, as noted in Morrison’s epigraph, extends to the “Sixty Million and more” who died in the Middle Passage. As Cummings notes, the inclusion of the “Sixty Million,” invites them into the text as flesh and means that Beloved is Sethe’s daughter, but she will also be representative of those who are “[d]isremembered and unaccounted for among her race” (557). Therefore, the sense of “belonging to” as a family and as a people is being deconstructed and reconstructed throughout the text.

The sense of racial and familial belonging is also addressed in another epigraph by Morrison where she refers to the New Testament book of Romans: “I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not my beloved.” In these lines, Paul quotes the Old Testament book of Hosea. Hosea, a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel, shares God’s message that simply being Jewish does not guarantee one’s inclusion in the true Israel, which comprised God’s “chosen people.” Hosea prophesies that only a remnant of Israel, that recognizes Christ as the Messiah will be spared. As a result, Paul later references this verse from Hosea in the New Testament in order to show that God’s call to his people does not only extend to the Jews, a chosen group of people, but that it also extends to the Gentiles. The book of Hosea, like *Beloved*, “moves back and forth between threatened judgment for continued disobedience and anticipated restoration as a result of repentance” (Guthrie 64). God speaks this truth

to the people in poetic form through Hosea, an offended husband, as he engages with his unfaithful wife. Morrison's reference to this text and her title, *Beloved*, lends to a reading of the inclusion of a people who had once been excluded. Though the "Sixty Million" perished, Beloved, Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and the others remain and belong despite social acceptance. The Old Testament prophecy that he who was once not chosen, will indeed belong has been fulfilled. As a result, Morrison's reference to the prophecy is once it has been fulfilled. She quotes Paul's reference in the New Testament to signal that he who was once not beloved *is* now beloved and thus belongs. However, the fulfillment of this prophecy relied upon the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament. Messianic Jews and Gentiles can share in salvation because they can have a relationship with Christ. In *Beloved*, it is Beloved's death that allows Sethe and her children to remain and evade schoolteacher's recapture, and it is her resurrection that bridge the gap, not between Jews and Gentiles, but between her identity as a daughter and her representation of those "sixty million" previously lost and forgotten among her race.

Morrison's novel, though fictional focuses loosely on the historical and factual story of Margaret Garner, a young mother, who, like Sethe, killed one of her children (and attempted to kill them all), in order to keep them from returning to slavery following her escape to freedom. According to Morrison, "She was certainly single-minded and, judging from the comments, she had the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom" (XVII). Morrison's desire in *Beloved* was to expand on this historical account of Garner by creating thoughts for her that would be in line with historical accounts, but not limited there so that her text might also encounter contemporary audiences and issues surrounding "freedom, responsibility,

and women's 'place'' (XVII). Therefore, Morrison takes a look at the "interior life" of Sethe, a woman like Margaret Garner, to "render enslavement as a personal experience" in which womanly and motherly love may be asserted in behaviors that are not in line with societal expectations (XIX). It is specifically through the violent behavior of black females in *Beloved* that Morrison creates a new vision of womanhood and motherhood in which slave mothers, and those recently freed, are empowered in a system that has previously tried to oppress and constrain them.

Patterns of violence emerge quickly in historical slave narratives, and Morrison's text is no different. Just as Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass detail the acts of violence, both emotional and physical, imposed upon the slave from the severing of familial ties to the physical abuse observed or inflicted at a young age, the characters in Morrison's *Beloved* are not immune. To be exact, the slave states accounted for 94% of the nation's 2129 reported deaths by suffocation in 1860 (Johnson 493). This same study determined that most of these victims were most likely slave children. Most of these deaths were attributed to the "great carelessness and total inability to take care of themselves" (Johnson 495). However, as Garner's story, and Morrison's novel note, Black women were creating new patterns for themselves as women and as mothers, and although these violent acts disrupted social expectations, they established the authoritative power and decisions of the African American woman and mother in a new light.

Morrison depicts maternal abandonment, rape, physical abuse, and other horrors in slavery as they are applied to the bodies of women and observed through the eyes of women. As observed in the previous analysis of Jacobs's text, the ability for a mother,

especially a slave mother, to make a decision by herself and for herself provides her with a great deal of power. Jacobs's decision to break with moral codes and choose Mr. Sands as the father of her children allowed her to exert and maintain rights over her body. While this decision was not socially accepted, it was a great means of empowerment for Jacobs. Similarly, Morrison's protagonist, Sethe, is faced with a decision to either allow her children and herself to be taken back into slavery by schoolteacher, or she can make a decision to secure their freedom through death. Although Sethe's decision to kill her child was not socially accepted, it transforms her from a position of powerlessness to a position of empowerment as a mother who possesses her own children and maternal body (Putnam 37).

Beloved begins and ends in the free state of Ohio in the little house at 124 Bluestone Road after Beloved's death; however, time for Sethe and the other inhabitants does not begin and end there. Instead, Morrison presents life as it is constantly interrupted, interpreted, and impacted by the past through memory and death. In the first pages, the devastation unravels: Sethe, a mother of four, is left with only one child, Denver, after escaping Sweet Home Plantation. Her two boys, Howard and Bulgar, ran away following the murder of the Crawling-Already? Girl. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, is also in the home, but dies some 28 days after their arrival. Love and loss are themes quickly explored as Baby Suggs rejects Sethe's idea to move in order to get away from the "baby's fury" that was filling their house. Baby Suggs, no stranger to grief, explains, "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (Morrison 6). Death is ever present, and Baby Suggs outlines her own acquaintance with loss. In fact, she was better prepared to learn of her son, Halle's,

Sethe's husband's, death than she was to deal with a child she would have the opportunity to love and raise as a mother. These first depictions of motherhood detail that maternal loss was great:

What was left to hurt her now? News of Halle's death? No. She Had been prepared for that better than had for his life. 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. Seven times she had done that: Held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own—fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked. (Morrison 163)

Baby Suggs shows that the maternal experience is consistently marked with pain and loss.

Sethe, in consistency with slave narratives, knew little of her own mother and father. She only remembers seeing her mother, Ma'am, a few times. She has one other personal memory of her mother and that is when her mother shows her a circle and a cross burnt into her skin under her right breast. Ma'am shows this mark to Sethe so that Sethe might be able to identify her body should her face not be recognizable. Sethe recounts that her mother was hung, but "by the time they cut her down nobody could tell where she had a circle and a cross or not, least of all me and I did look" (Morrison 73). The physical identifying mark could not even withstand plantation cruelty. All Sethe learns of her father is that once while on a ship, Sethe's mother and a friend, Nan, were "taken up many times by the crew," and her father was the only one her mother put her

arms around, so “she gave the name of the black man” to Sethe (74). According to Nan, the other babies Sethe’s mother bore were all discarded due to the cruel manner in which they were conceived. Nan’s detail of the rape of Ma’am and her decision to discard those offspring introduces Sethe to the maternal right to choose. Although Ma’am could not protect her own body from being conquered by the ship crew, she could control the maternal aspect. Ma’am asserted her authority by choosing to keep the child who was fathered by a man who meant something to her. Ma’am reserved and protected her sphere as mother even when she could not reserve and protect her body.

These stories of Sethe’s past show the familiarity of violence that black women in her family had previously endured. While Sethe observes the violent loss of the woman who was her biological mother, Ma’am did not hold the emotional maternal role for Sethe, because slavery never allowed the bond to form between the two. However, Ma’am introduced a concept to Sethe early in life that stuck with her into her own maternal years. Because work often kept slave mothers from their babies and children, Ma’am still impressed the importance of “knowing” her to Sethe. As a mother, Ma’am wants Sethe to be able to recognize her as her mother even if she is stripped of all other familiarity. When all life is gone, she wants the physical mark to serve Sethe as a way to always know and recognize her mother. This need to “know” one’s mother and recognize her translates into a great importance that Sethe places on the physical maternal presence once she becomes a mother.

While slavery could diminish the proximity and the emotional connection between Ma’am and Sethe, it could not keep Sethe from knowing/recognizing her mother in body. Even as a baby, Sethe was not nursed by her mother. “Nan had to nurse

whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own" (Morrison 236). When one has no milk, one appears to have no mother. The ability to nurse one's child plays a powerful role in Sethe's life. Denied the right to nurse from her mother as a child, the opportunity to nurse her own children becomes a defining ability for Sethe as a mother. This most private sector of her life becomes a facet of her maternal life over which slavery is determined to take control. Harriet Jacobs exposed the sexual intrusion of slavery on her interior life, and Sethe reveals the way in which it corrupts her ability to mother by ravaging her body and taking her milk. Not only does this determination to mother demonstrate Sethe's desire to have full control of her own body, but it also shows a contrast between herself as a mother and the other figure that is depicted in her own mother, as well as in Baby Suggs as a mother.

The ability to have breast milk is dependent upon having a child, and the child is in return dependent upon the breastmilk. Therefore, making the two reliant upon each other. As Jean Wyatt explains, a mother's milk is just one aspect of motherhood that creates a permeable boundary between mother and child (480). Beloved tells Sethe, "You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?" Later, she states, "I have your milk...I brought your milk" (Morrison). These utterances erode the boundary between mother and child based on the inability of one to separate from the other (Wyatt 481). The early denial of a child being given her mother's milk is the most primitive violent act committed, as it is the painful, unnatural separation between a mother and a child. Therefore, Wyatt explains that "nursing serves as a figure for the totality and exclusivity of mother-daughter fusion" (481). As the book continues, Morrison presents

Sethe as a mother who refuses to be the mother she had and brutally lost to slavery. Instead, she is determined to be *with* her children and identifies herself as a maternal body (Wyatt 474). Denver describes her mother as:

“The one who never looked away, who when a man got stomped to death by a mare right in front of Sawyer’s restaurant did not look away; and when a sow began eating her own litter did not look away then either. And when the baby’s spirit picked up Here Boy and slammed him into the wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his eye, so hard he went into convulsion and chewed up his tongue, still her mother had not looked away. (Morrison 14).

Sethe was well acquainted with violence from her own childhood to adulthood to motherhood. However, Denver says she “had not looked away” and Sethe never looked away from the men hanging in the trees or from the bleeding baby in her hands. Slavery had worked to kill Sethe just as it had killed her back. “None of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years,” but when she got out of Kentucky and with her kids in Ohio, that all changed (Morrison 21). She explains that when she got to Ohio, “there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted” and she said she felt something, and it was that feeling of unhinged maternal love that brought her back to life (191).

When Sethe ran away from Sweet Home some 18 years ago, she recounts her journey and the people she meets along the way. Because the story is a favorite of Denver’s, Sethe focuses on her experience with a white woman named Amy who helps her along the way and was “the raggediest looking trash you ever saw” (Morrison 38). Amy treats Sethe’s back that had been opened up by Schoolteacher’s cowhide. Amy tells

her it looks like a tree. “A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves” (Morrison 18). As Sethe tells her story to Paul D, one of the men who had also been with her at Sweet Home, she moves beyond this violence and even the fact that she was whipped while pregnant. She cannot omit the fact that the men also “took my milk” (20). Sethe’s milk becomes the unifying element of maternity. It is the symbol of motherhood that slavery denied her own mother. Because Ma’am was unable to nurse Sethe due to her work in the field, Sethe was fueled to successfully escape slavery, because she would not deny her own child her milk. Even as Sethe fears that her unborn baby has died in the womb, she is determined to complete her journey for the baby who has gone ahead of her. “Sethe looked down at her stomach and touched it. The baby was dead. She had not died in the night, but the baby had. If that was the case, then there was no stopping now. She would get that milk to her baby girl if she had to swim” (Morrison 97). Therefore, the motivating factor of Sethe’s journey was to preserve the lives of her children, in a way that only a mother could. As life for her children is the goal, it becomes clear that slavery, the direction from which she fled, was death. All of the previous mother figures were subjected to violence and maternal death in the separation between that which was to be one. Even Ms. Garner, who was a kind mistress back at Sweet Home was without children, which makes her yet another image of failed motherhood under the institution of slavery. Though Ms. Garner was endearing, she lacked children, and though Baby Suggs was a mother by definition, she lacked emotional and physical connection with her children. Because Sethe was raised under the confines of slavery, she knew “what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left” (236). Sethe reiterates the way

slavery undermines motherhood in that it denied a child of a mother's milk; therefore, it denied a child its mother. As a baby, slavery robbed Sethe of her mother's milk, and as an adult, slavery literally stole her milk. Sethe describes the ruthlessness of her personal experience as a woman and as a mother in slavery as she tells Paul D the story of her milk being stolen by two of the boys back at Sweet Home:

Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, not hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you?... I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, ones sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up. I am still full of that, God damn it, and I can't go back and add more. (83)

Even schoolteacher mentions that beating and taking Sethe's milk might have been what pushed her to kill her baby in the woodshed. To schoolteachers's dismay, the woman who had "at least ten breeding years" had "gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat her and made her cut and run" (Morrison 176). Though schoolteacher only refers to Sethe as an animal in her "breeding" ability and her lack of value now that she was a "mishandled creature," he recognizes that the behavior of his nephew in beating and taking Sethe's milk were of the most debilitating acts of violence toward Sethe (Morrison 176). Schoolteacher recognized his nephew's role in the undoing of Sethe, as an animal such as a dog or a horse, and as a result, he would not allow him to satisfaction of hunting for Sethe and the four other pieces of "property." Because Sethe's maternal body was ravaged in this way, the rest of the book details her attempts to once again extend her rights over her own human, maternal body. Her quest

to freedom is fueled by her determination to get her milk to her baby in order to fulfill her maternal role. In the killing of the “Crawling Already? Baby,” she proves that she will stop at nothing to claim these rights to her maternal body as her children are “parts of her” (Wyatt 476).

In this same encounter in the woodshed, schoolteacher asserts his superiority over not only Sethe, but slaves in general. He explains to his nephew the importance of regulating the punishments of their slaves: “See what happened when you overbeat creatures God had given you the responsibility of—the trouble it was, and the loss” (Morrison 176). This language echoes Baby Suggs’s view of the immorality of white people in her last words: “The lesson she had learned from her sixty years a slave and ten years free: that there was no bad luck in the world but white people. ‘They don’t know when to stop.’” (Morrison 105). Baby Suggs’s dying words condemn white slaveholders like schoolteacher and their immorality combined with the “lack of human limitation on its actions” (Krumholz 399). Because, as Baby Suggs says, white people ‘don’t know when to stop,’ “slavery pushes the limits of the human capacity for suffering” (Krumholz 400). As Sethe understand the immorality of schoolteacher and has personally experienced the painful and degrading effects of slavery’s physical abuse on her maternal body, she knows when to stop, and she determines when life should end. Therefore, like Aunt Martha in Jacobs’s text, Baby Suggs, the matriarch figure, is the image of morality and spirituality in Morrison’s text. However, as Krumholz notes, Baby Suggs’s “morality is based on a method of engagement and interpretation rather than on static moral dictates” (398). Evidence of formal religion is evidenced in her language, but it is her “guidance of a free heart” and imagination that is preached more often:

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. (Morrison 103)

Baby Suggs's refusal to accept formal religion shows her awareness of the way in which the Bible had been manipulated in order to justify slavery and any other matter deemed necessary by the slaveholder. As a result, Baby Suggs, unlike Jacobs's Aunt Martha, does not specify strict lines of good and evil. Therefore, what is good and moral is subjective. Such a reading of religion and morality depicts schoolteacher as the only truly evil character, and it allows Sethe to make decisions, as a mother, for her family that, though contrary to societal norms, are free from judgment based on objective morality.

Sethe asserts her dominance over her body, and her children, who are a continuation of her body, to stop what will otherwise be subjected to the same violence and maternal death she knows to exist in slavery and specifically at Sweet Home. Therefore, slavery is repeatedly presented as maternal death. It deliberately keeps a baby from its source of livelihood without maternal consent. The mother's milk is what makes the connection between "you" and "me" soluble and serves as "a figure for the totality and exclusivity of mother-daughter fusion" (Wyatt 481). Sethe explains, "All I knew was I had to get my milk to 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" (Morrison 19). This trip to the free state of Ohio becomes a maternal quest for Sethe (Wyatt 475). Like Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Sethe

contemplates death, but it is for the sake of her unborn child that she must not surrender her life. Sethe rationalized death as:

“didn’t seem such a bad idea, all in all, in view of the step she would not have to take, but the thought of herself stretched out dead while the little antelope lived on—an hour? a day? a day and a night?—in her lifeless body grieved her so she made the groan that made the person walking on a path not ten yards away halt and stand right still.” (Morrison 37-38).

Sethe was resolved to save her children and her motherhood from the imprisoned life of slavery known as death. “Trying to get to her three children, one of whom was starving for the food she carried; that after her husband had disappeared; that after her milk had been stole, her back pulped, her children orphaned, she was not to have an easeful death. No” (Morrison 38). It is Sethe’s resolve and sole determination to be a mother who nurses her children that propels Sethe to freedom. The relationship between mother and child is solidified as a physical relationship on this quest, and the child is depicted as part of the maternal body. The physical connection between mother and child is further developed in the detailed account of childbirth, which according to Wyatt, was a conversation that was new to Western cultural discourse at the time (476). In using the strictly feminine account of childbirth through the eyes of Amy and Sethe, Morrison parts the veil on the inner life of slave woman in noting that women are the source of life in *Beloved*. Amy and Sethe bring a child into the world, and Sethe maintains life through her very body.

The baby is reliant on the mother for survival, and the mother knows the innermost thoughts of the child better than the child knows for itself. Therefore, Sethe’s

journey for her children, and to be with her children, establishes her desire to be physically present for her children and to provide for them also. The mother becomes the source of life for her children, and her goal as mother is to sustain life as only she knows how.

This image of motherhood that Sethe provides is different from that of the other maternal figures. Sethe's mother, ma'am was physically absent from Sethe as a mother, and the physical marking on her body, which was to be a final attempt to identify her as Sethe's mother also failed. Therefore, in comparison to Sethe as a mother, slavery destroyed Ma'am's physical and emotional ability to mother. Similarly, Baby Suggs', ability to mother was also destroyed by slavery. However, when Morrison does discuss Baby Suggs as a mother figure, it is through the physical, rather than emotional, nature. When Halle's affection for his mother is considered, it is her physical nature that is described, and it is Halle's physical labor that proves his love for his mother. The narrator explains:

“Only Halle, who had watched her movements closely for the last four years, knew that to get in and out of bed she had to lift her thing with both hands, which was why he spoke to Mr. Garner about buying her out of there so she could sit down for a change. Sweet boy. The one person who did something hard for her: Gave her his work, his life...” (Morrison 165)

However, once the two are no longer physically connected through life together at Sweet Home, Baby Suggs's ability to mother Halle is destroyed. Even when Sethe remembers Baby Suggs, it is her physical presence that she misses. “She wished for Baby Suggs' fingers molding her nape, reshaping it, saying, ‘Lay em down, Sethe...’ Nine years

without the fingers or the voice of Baby Suggs was too much” (Morrison 101). Sethe explains that “If she lay among all the hands in the world, she would know Baby Suggs’ just as she did the good hands of the whitegirl looking for velvet” (Morrison 116). Therefore, throughout *Beloved*, the ability to mother is associated with the importance of one’s physical presence.

Sethe is the only one of the three mother figures who is able to physically remain a mother, and this is made possible through her physical connection of motherhood and the maternal body. The image of nursing continues to surface once Sethe reaches her children in Ohio at 124 Bluestone. Upon her arrival to 124, Gates says the “nurturing power of the slave mother” becomes literal. If slavery was maternal death, then the reunification with her children becomes maternal life. Sethe explains to Paul D., “I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide” (Morrison 190). Once reunited with her children, “She kept kissing them. She kissed the backs of their necks, the tops of their heads and the centers of their palms, and it was the boys who decided enough was enough when she lifted their shirts to kiss their tight round bellies” (Morrison 110). And when Sethe finally nurses the “Crawling-Already? Baby” girl, “they hit home together” (Morrison 110). Therefore, Sethe’s journey from Sweet Home has not been about freedom from slavery but about preservation of motherhood. Making the clear connection between slavery as the figurative and literal source of maternal death provides a positive interpretation for Sethe’s maternal violence.

The image of slavery as maternal death is further evidenced as Sethe talks with Amy during her escape from Sweet Home. Sethe, weary and weak, travels alongside

Amy to a lean-to for shelter. As the two observe dead bodies and snakes and unbearable conditions, Sethe describes Amy's "magic" when she "lifted Sethe's feet and legs and massaged them until she cried salt tears" (Morrison 42). Sethe's feet are compared to a swollen dead body, badly beaten by schoolteacher's nephew. However, as Sethe's tears flow from the pain of having them rubbed, Amy explains, "It's gonna hurt, now. Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (43). Sethe's physical body, like her maternal role, were killed and denied under slavery. As a result, the journey to freedom is a painful process in which coming back to life hurts. It hurts because one must engage with the pain of having been dead and situating that experience in life. Sethe further exhibits this painful reconciliation as she battles painful memories from the past that reappear in her present freedom to mother. As Krumholz notes, "Beloved embodies the suffering and guilt of the past, but she also embodies the power and beauty of the past and the need to realize the past fully in order to bring for the future, pregnant with opportunities" (401). Therefore, pain is an act of recovery. For Sethe, this applies to slavery and to motherhood.

When Sethe first arrives at 124 Bluestone Road, Baby Suggs bathes her. She physically cleans Sethe's ravaged body that is exhausted both from her journey from the death of slavery into the physical life of a mother and also from the physical act of giving birth. When wrapped in a blanket and nursing Denver, Baby Suggs observes Sethe's beaten back. The mark of slavery was on her back as the "roses of blood blossomed in the blanket covering Sethe's shoulders" (Morrison 110). However, Sethe's nursing babe was in front of her. Baby Suggs, Amy, and Paul D. remind Sethe of the scars on her back, but she is always looking to her children, whether it be the unborn child, the three

awaiting her in Ohio, Denver, or Beloved, she is always looking toward her role as a mother. In “Pain and the Unmaking of Self in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” Kristin Boudreau argues that Sethe, and others in the novel, are unable to effectively use language to describe their paths. As a result, Sethe adopts Amy’s romanticized description as the “clump of scars” on her back as a Choketree (Morrison 21). Boudreau claims that “Not only is she unable to gain access to whatever painful events she has endured in the past, but her memory---far from healing and reordering of her Sweet Home Days—merely replicates the violence of her past” (457). However, such a reading removes the sense of choice from Sethe and depicts Sethe’s maternal violence as second nature.

In her first twenty-eight days of freedom, Sethe quickly explains the importance and freedom of choice:

“All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day and that’s how she got through the waiting for Halle. Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.” (Morrison 112)

Sethe was claiming her position as a woman and a mother from the moment she arrived at 124. As Hazel V. Carby points out, the female slave’s “reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation; black women gave birth to property, and directly to capital itself in the form of slaves” (24-25). Therefore, Morrison’s specific attention to the mother/child, and more specifically, mother/daughter relationships, is to intentionally reveal the struggles endemic to female slaves and mothers. As a result, Morrison reinforces the difference between slave men and women. “While black men’s quest for

freedom took the shape of reclaiming their manhood, women's preponderant concern was to save their children and retain control over their reproductive power" (Liscio 34). It is the intentional acts of violence that come as a result of Sethe's unwavering desire to save her children and retain control of her reproductive power that are contrary to societal acceptance, even in her own community. Though significantly indoctrinated into the world of violence during her time in slavery, Sethe does not seek violence in a traditional sense. Instead, because Sethe associates schoolteacher, slavery, and Sweet Home as maternal death, then life absent from slavery, schoolteacher, and Sweet Home are maternal life.

As Sethe works to balance her new role as woman and mother in her first twenty-eight days of freedom, she is faced with the danger of being carried back into slavery by schoolteacher and his nephews. In these twenty-eight days, 124 Bluestone has been a community home. It has been filled with friends and community and prayer and learning. Morrison has depicted one deconstructed family after another. Men and women have died and been murdered and tortured, and those who have made it to freedom have reconstructed the family in the form of a communal brotherhood and sisterhood. Baby Suggs reminds Sethe, "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead" (Morrison 6). However, when schoolteacher arrives at 124, Sethe is struck with the fact that to lose her children to slavery again is to suffer maternal death. When she recognizes the slaveholder's hat coming down the road, she is determined to retain their freedom and familial bonds. As she watches schoolteacher draw near, she responds:

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 193)

Sethe asserts her position as mother by choosing for her children. Slavery is maternal death. Returning to Sweet Home means death for her children, so choosing to exercise her dominant role as mother through violence, and even death, actually becomes her only way to actually live. Though the murder of the “Crawling Already? Girl” is ghastly, it is Sethe’s choice to make as a mother. Just as it was her ma’am’s decision to kill her other children and it was Baby Suggs’s decision to emotionally distance herself from her children. However, Sethe’s sole role in the text is to be a mother. Sethe explains to Paul D, “It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (Morrison 194). Therefore, her act of infanticide is her greatest act of mothering. As Christopher Peterson explains, Sethe must “kill her own daughter...to claim that daughter as her own over and above the master’s claim” (554). Sethe’s ability to choose violence in the face of oppression redirects her “racialized powerlessness into maternal possession and dominance” (Putnam 37).

Sethe’s mother love is not questioned when she is reunited with her children. When she arrives at 124, she is battered and beaten, but she is determined to nurse her baby as only she can do. When her tattered back is wrapped and still bleeding, she cannot hold back the desire to embrace and kiss her children. These emotions, which were never expected or accepted under slavery, were the societal norms of freedom. However, “Because the normative vision of maternity tends to elevate the mother/child relation to an idealized field of ethical action, infanticide is most often read either as an

unintelligible aberration from normative kinship, or as an act of pure love, in which case it is thought to be purely intelligible” (Peterson 551). As a result, Sethe’s decision is not a vicious attempt to take her child’s life, but it is one in which she desires to preserve its life from all the ills of slavery with which she was too familiar. “What Sethe claims signifies not only her daughter, but also what she claims for her act of infanticide: namely, that it is an act of pure love” (Peterson 555).

Because Sethe has established the physical nature of motherhood, her role transcends all boundaries. Paul D warns Sethe that she loves too much and that it is risky for a “used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much,” but Sethe’s maternal role is solidified (Morrison 54). This role is endless as Sethe explains, “Grown don’t mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What’s that supposed to mean? In my heart it don’t mean a thing...I’ll protect her while I’m live and I’ll protect her when I ain’t” (54). Sethe does not lose the memory of her mother’s body hanging, and as she remembers wondering about reasons why her mother would have been lynched, she knows it was not because her mother ran away. “Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma’am and nobody’s ma’am would run off and leave her daughter” (Morrison 74). Therefore, Sethe’s early image of motherhood is one in which proximity is of vital importance. Mother’s do not let their children be taken, and they do not leave their children. Similarly, Sethe’s earliest encounters with Halle show her desire to have a more traditional family.

On the small plantation of Sweet Home, there were 5 men and 2 women. Sethe was given the option to choose her mate from the five men. Sethe chose Halle, and “Halle was more like a brother than a husband. His care suggested a family relationship

rather than a man's laying claim" (Morrison 31). Though their request to be married was laughed at by Ms. Garner, they remained steadfast in their desire to emulate the traditional (white) family. This desire to have a nuclear family that is based on choice and proximity remains constant for Sethe. And as is the case in the woodshed, when confronted with a force that attempts to strip Sethe of this claim over her family and her body, she will stop at nothing to retain her control and maternal presence.

Although others in the text do not agree with Sethe's decision to kill the child, she stands by her decision. Before Paul D's arrival to 124, Denver explains, "For twelve years, long before Grandma Baby died, there had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends. No colored people. Certainly no hazelnut man with long hair and no notebook, no charcoal, no oranges, no questions" (Morrison 14). Even after going to jail and being shunned by the greater community, Sethe defends her violence when she tells Paul D., "I did it, I got us all out...I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under school teacher" (Morrison 190). Sethe's decision to kill the baby was what she had to do, and as the mother, she was the only rightful one to do it. As Sethe tells Paul D. about what she had done, Morrison opens the door to a specific side of life that is solely female experience. Although the two shared time together at Sweet Home, Sethe will not assume her experience is shared and understood by him. In telling Sethe's story, Morrison gives attention to the specific trauma experienced by women:

In *Beloved* Morrison, like Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, negotiates the legacy of slavery as a national trauma, and as an intensely personal trauma as well. Both works challenge the notion that the end of institutional slavery brings

about freedom by depicting the emotional and psychological scars of slavery as well as the persistence of racism. And both Morrison and Du Bois delve into the stories and souls of black folk to tap the resources of memory and imagination as tools of strength and healing. (Krumholz 396)

Therefore, as Sethe recounts her experiences to Paul D, she shares her painful past, but it is also the painful journey based largely on her maternal decisions. She tells him, “Maybe you don’t know what it was like for me to get away from there.” In doing this, she indicates the need to tell her own story that is not to be told or understood as being the same as his own. In fact, with the disappearance of Halle, Sethe explains, “I did it. I got us all out....Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided...I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that...me saying, *Go on*, and *Now*. Me having to look out. Me using my own head” (Morrison 190). Sethe’s dialogue establishes her situation as being specific to her case and does not assume it would be understood by Paul D. Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home was made alone. There was no male hero to her story. Instead, her only shelters are provided by women: Amy and Baby Suggs. All the men who were supposed to join her in her escape were detained. As a result, Sethe must send her children ahead of her without anyone’s assistance, she must bear her beating by schoolteacher and the subsequent nursing by his nephews. She then must struggle along while six months pregnant to freedom. Much to Paul D’s surprise, “it wasn’t no whiteboy at all. Was a girl” who helped Sethe navigate her way and deliver Denver (Morrison 38). At times, as Liscio notes in “Beloved’s Narrative: Writing Mother’s Milk,” Paul D only hears and repeats the aspects of Sethe’s experience that speak to his own masculine experience of slavery (34). As a result, Sethe

continues insisting on her version: “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.”

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (Morrison 20)

Despite Paul D’s fixation on the physical beating that is associated with his own male slave experiences, Sethe continues to assert her personal experience that is different and important to be heard. Her inner life is feminine and her struggles are worth being told and heard. Through Sethe’s experience, Morrison is giving a voice to the slave mother and black woman who so long remained outside narrative (Liscio 35). Sethe is repeatedly making the claim that her purpose was to provide for her children by being their mother. Paul D is alarmed to learn that Sethe was capable of killing her own child, but he was also concerned that she could love a child with such passion.

This distance between Paul D and Sethe is continually encountered. While Sethe was exposed to violence and maternal loss in her early childhood, Paul D was also exposed to violence and influenced by the language of his master. He complains that Sethe’s love is “too thick,” “what [she] did was wrong;” it may be “worse” than the enslaver’s action (Morrison 54). ““You got two feet, Sethe, not four.”” His judgment of Sethe and occurrences in the world around him is linked to that of his master (Cummings 558). As a result, Morrison reveals not only the implications slavery has on motherhood, but also on personhood. As Sethe exposes these experiences, she acknowledges her ability to make it as a woman, but she also acknowledges the pain that has accompanied these decisions.

Despite the shared experience within slavery, Sethe and Paul D emerge in freedom haunted by their pasts. This is especially the case for Sethe when the 18 year old murdered daughter, Beloved, arrives. When Beloved appears at 124, Sethe is not given the opportunity to change her decision to kill Beloved that day in the woodshed, but to “erase some of the pain she inflicted upon herself by killing her child” (Mayfield 6). Sethe does this not by begging forgiveness from her child, but by establishing her accomplishments as a mother based on her own definition.

I couldn't find Halle or nobody. I didn't know Sixo was burned up and Paul D dressed in a collar you wouldn't believe. Not till later. So I sent you all to the wagon with the woman who waited in the corn. Ha ha. No notebook for my babies and no measuring string neither. What I had to get through late I got through because of you. Passed right by those boys hanging in the trees. One had Paul A's short on but not his feet or his head. I walked right on by because only me had your milk, and God do what He would, I was going to get it to you. You remember that, don't you; that I did? That when I got here I had enough milk enough for all? (Morrison 233)

Without explaining the exact reason, Sethe chooses to share her memory of the notebook kept by schoolteacher's nephews in which the boys compared Sethe to an animal. She once overheard schoolteacher talking to his students and stops when she hears her own name. School teacher tells them, “put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (Morrison 228). She only mentions this occurrence once, but she mentions those notebooks multiple times. The memory of being compared to an animal cannot be repressed, and she mentions her own shame and the violence she observed

without specifically relating it to her ability to mother. This experience mirrors Sethe's own memory of her mother. When her mother tells her of the burned emblem under her breast, Sethe tells her mother that she would also like to have the mark on her. When she tells her mother this, her mother slaps her. However, her mother does not use language to connect the two. Instead, her mother takes her own shameful experience that stripped her of her ability to be a mother and reacts with violence towards Sethe by slapping her. This experience, though it is physically painful and violent in that she is struck by her mother, is violence in the form of love as Sethe's Ma'am does not want her to also have to be burned and marked by slavery. The same is true of Sethe as she constantly says she cannot have her children returned to schoolteacher or any "notebooks." As a result, language does not explain Sethe's violence in killing her baby, but the violence speaks to connect emotion with her unwillingness to allow her children to suffer shame, abuse, or maternal abandonment under schoolteacher or slavery.

It is in this second part of the novel, the "atonement" as Krumholz terms it, that Sethe is enveloped by the past, through isolation with Beloved, and forced to suffer the pain of the past (396). Beloved's return to 124 not only disrupts the physical setting, but it is an emotional eruption as the past forces its way into the present.

Amy told Sethe that "anything coming back to life hurts," that was true of her maternal life, and it is also true of suppressed memories. As Krumholz notes:

"Beloved is both the pain and the cure. As an embodiment of the repressed past, she acts as an unconscious imp, stealing away the volition of the characters, and as a psychoalytic urge, she pries open suppressed memories and emotions" and

she “makes the characters accept their pasts, their squelched memories, and their own hearts, as beloved. (400).

Once connections are made between Sethe’s exposure to maternal violence at a young age and her own maternal violence, Sethe is left to face her new reality. *Beloved*, as a ghost, forces “Sethe to confront the gap between her motherlove and the realities of motherhood in slavery.” (Krumholz 400). The family she had created and envisioned with Halle at Sweet Home never came to fruition, just as Jacobs’s ideal vision of motherhood ended differently. However, Sethe, like Jacobs, transforms her position as a powerless woman into a dominating mother. By defining slavery as maternal death and refiguring herself as the maternal body, she reclaims her maternal body and her children. Females like Sethe offer a new perspective for violence in which it is a learned language for love, and while these acts of violence often transcend communal understanding, they liberate and empower the maternal figure in a system that has previously worked tirelessly to oppress her.

CHAPTER 3

Empowerment as Maternal Provision in Perkins-Valdez's *Wench*

In a 2010 interview with National Public Radio, Dolen Perkins-Valdez explains her motivation for writing the 2010 neo-slave narrative, *Wench*. Perkins-Valdez explains that after reading a biography of W.E.B. Du Bois by Dave Levering Lewis called *Biography of a Race*, she learned that Du Bois previously taught at Wilberforce University, which had originally been the site of a resort hotel that was often frequented by slaveholders and their enslaved mistresses (Neary). As a result, Perkins-Valdez set out to research and recreate what life might have been like for the enslaved women who “vacationed” as concubines with their white masters at such a resort. In this attempt, Perkins-Valdez moves beyond whether or not such relationships existed between slave and master and expands previously conceived notions of the peculiar institution by showing the complexity of the relationships that did in fact exist between masters and slaves. She further illustrates these complexities by showing how slavery and concubinage not only impacted the slave women, but how they affected them once they became mothers and how it also later affected their children. By exposing the inner lives of the four slave women, Perkins-Valdez reveals the ways in which the women used their positions for empowerment, and she also exposes the different ways in which slavery impacted all women, including white women. Through the experiences of these women, she effectively captures the way in which the system of slavery affected everyone despite race or gender.

The women featured in *Wench* work to incorporate the aforementioned struggles of womanhood, slavery and motherhood that are faced by women and reveal that though

the scenery changes in the North, little changes regarding their treatment. Perkins-Valdez resurrects and speaks to the stories of Jacobs and Sethe as previously discussed and examines the effect of sexual, physical, racial, social, and gender oppression suffered by African American women who also became African American mothers.

As Bo G. Ekelund explains, it is black female writers who have moved beyond the “historical romances featuring white heroes and southern belles in the antebellum South” to expose “histories of discrimination and oppression” (140). In doing this, the authors humanize the oppressed and expose the often idealized or ignored master/slave relationships. Although little critical work has been written regarding Perkins-Valdez’s text, *Wench* causes one to recall the infamous Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson relationship. Barbara Chase-Riboud’s 1979 novel, *Sally Hemings*, disrupts previous romanticized versions of the historical interracial relationship. Those hopeful views of the Hemings/Jefferson relationship as the basis of racial reconciliation are rightfully balked as critics such as Eve Allegra Raimon argue that the sentimental readings of the relationship as a “love” story “participate in a myth of American racial history that masks the workings of the white supremacy under the cover of interracial romance” (154). As Dawkins notes, scholars are no longer concerned with whether or not proof may be supplied regarding the relationship between Hemings and Jefferson. They, like Perkins-Valdez, are now concerned with the implications of any such relationship on the legacy of those involved in the relationship, specifically, Jefferson and the family of Hemings. In *Sally Hemings and The President’s Daughter*, the story of Harriet, the only proven child of Hemings and Jefferson, Chase-Riboud “demonstrates how slavery—and the sexual exploitation of black women within slavery—have disrupted kinship structures

and wrought lasting devastation upon the African American family” (Dawkins 793). Similarly, Valdez-Perkins takes a look at the way in which four specific women are impacted as they serve as concubines. These relationships are complex, and to romanticize them is to ignore the power structure under which the female participants were enslaved physically and psychologically. As Spencer states, “relations that appear consensual” are nonetheless “shaped by the forcible protocols of slavery” (508). Therefore, analysis of Perkins-Valdez’s text forces the reader to look beyond any sentimental relationship that may appear to exist on the surface between Lizzie and Drayle, as it is the result of “forcible protocols of slavery” that distorts interactions due to the underlying power structure.

Perkins-Valdez’s *Wench* provides a variety of images of womanhood and motherhood through the perspective of four different women: Lizzie, Mawu, Sweet, and Reenie. In these women, Perkins-Valdez complicates the notions of love and motherhood by placing each of the women in the free state of Ohio while on “vacation” with their masters. Each woman brings a different aspect of the Peculiar Institution with her to Ohio, and the overarching question of whether or not the women will make their escape while in the free North remains throughout the novel as they make their trips each summer. It is Lizzie’s relationship with Drayle, her master and the father of her children, that generates the most confusion among readers and the women as she often places her loyalty with Drayle rather than with her community of women. Lizzie’s relationship with Drayle only becomes more complicated and exacerbated by her position as a mother. Lizzie is often conflicted as she wishes “that she could be with them [the women who escaped] and that she could return to her children. It felt like her right arm was being

pulled one way and her left arm being pulled the other. She knew it wasn't a right way to feel" (Perkins-Valdez 237). Like Harriet Jacobs and Morrison's Sethe, Lizzie is desperately seeking freedom for her children; however, neither death nor escape is presented as an option for her. Instead, Lizzie's faith in Drayle to do the right thing is reminiscent of Jacobs's faith in Mr. Sands being a man of his word and freeing their children. However, Jacobs, unlike Lizzie, refuses to dote upon or even wait idly for Mr. Sands to grant her children's freedom. Instead, Jacobs goes into hiding and orchestrates her freedom, along with the freedom of her children, from her grandmother's garret. In *Beloved*, Sethe is similarly motivated to secure her freedom and the freedom of her children through action and ultimately infanticide. Therefore, Lizzie's account depicts the mother who uses her position as an enslaved concubine in order to secure rights and privileges for the oppressed among her. Lizzie uses her relationship with Drayle to manipulate privileges for herself and freedom for her children. She does not resort to violence or escape as Jacobs and Sethe did. Instead, Lizzie courts slavery because it provides her with the form of service to others that she comprehends as love and as care. So long as Drayle provides for Lizzie, she feels love, and so long as her children benefit from this relationship, she understands this as love and fulfillment of her duty as mother. By remaining loyal to Drayle, she risks losing the only community provided to her on both the plantation and at the resort, but like Jacobs and Sethe, Lizzie sacrifices social acceptance in order to simultaneously provide for her children and act as a mother.

Lizzie, the protagonist of *Wench*, accompanies her master to Tawawa House Resort where she meets and forms deep relationships with other women accompanying their masters. Of the women present, Lizzie appears to have the most compassionate

relationship with her master, Drayle. The ability to truly love and be in love with one's master is left open to question as Perkins-Valdez explores the slave/master relationship by revealing that Lizzie has been with her master since age 13. By the age of 16, Lizzie had moved from the slave quarters and given her master two children. As a result, her master extends beyond the role of her lover into the role of a father figure. Drayle is quite possibly more of a father figure to Lizzie than he is to their children. Lizzie's character is further complicated in that Fran, her master/lover's wife, is unable to bear children of her own, and Lizzie has the only two children her husband fathers. Although vacationing in the free state of Ohio, Lizzie's character is left in a position that paralyzes her mobility as a result of her master/slave and woman/mother relationships. While her inability to escape may initially render her helpless, it is important to note that Lizzie stays with her master by choice rather than by force. Because Drayle uses restraint rather than force in their sexual encounters, Lizzie is made to think his sexual aggression is something other than rape. It is in fact, as Harris notes, Drayle's restraint that creates and ensures an "entangled loyalty" from Lizzie (92). Drayle knows that Lizzie will do anything for her children, and he uses that knowledge to threaten her. However, Lizzie, like Sally Hemings and her daughter, Harriet, uses her position with Drayle to not only persuade him to see her point of view and grant her wishes, but she also "actively subverts patriarchal power" (Dawkins 801). Therefore, Lizzie's resistance is complicated by her position as concubine, but she does resist in small and significant ways.

Mawu, another slave visiting Tawawa with her master, Tip, foils Lizzie. Mawu despises her master and does all she can to make herself unattractive in order to avoid his

advances. Mawu, like another of the women, Reenie, has made herself unable to bear children in order to avoid bringing more children into the peculiar institution as property. Mawu's character is constantly in pursuit of freedom. Although the thought to run crosses Lizzie's mind on more than a few occasions, she does not join Mawu and Reenie in their pursuit of freedom, even though Mawu waits for her, as she cannot bear the thought of losing her children, Nate and Rabbit. Mawu speaks to Lizzie as a mother by asking her what she may do for her children while remaining a slave. Mawu's character elicits visions of Sethe in *Beloved*. Sethe would rather kill her children and Mawu would rather see a child abandoned than to allow him or her to reside in slavery. Mawu asked the women, "*How can you stand being a slave? Don't you want to claim that arm? That leg? That breast?*" (Perkins-Valdez 42, emphasis in original). Mawu constantly reminds the women of the brutality of slavery in the words she speaks and in the beating and sexual violence she endures. Despite the way in which Lizzie might romanticize slavery, Mawu is consistently fighting and forcing her to see reality.

Sweet, the most physically visible mother figure, is pregnant with her fifth child during the first summer at Tawawa House, but she loses the baby. Heart broken by the loss, Sweet is left to face yet more tragedy the following year when she learns her other four children have died due to a Cholera outbreak on her plantation back home. Not allowed to return to the plantation upon learning of the deaths of her children, Sweet mends burial outfits for the women to bury in honor of each of her children. There, at the empty graves of all five of her children, Sweet is later found dead. Although suicide may be presumed, no explanation is given for Sweet's death other than a mother's grief. Sweet's character depicts the pain and suffering of being both woman and mother. It is

her position as a female that causes her master to take her as his concubine, and it is also her position as mother that holds her hostage even in the arms of freedom. Like Lizzie, Sweet, would not escape as it meant that she would have to consciously abandon her children; however, her position as concubine caused her to be away from her dying children. Like Morrison's Sethe, Sweet cannot imagine a mother who would ever leave her child. While tragic, Sweet's story is successful in that based on her religious beliefs, she will be reunited with her children. Ultimately, motherhood, and the fatal grief it produced, freed Sweet from the grip of slavery and ensured she would never be apart from her children as she followed them even to death.

Reenie is the oldest of the four women. She is routinely sexually violated by her master, Sir, who is also her brother, and she is also turned over to the resort manager for his own sexual use. Reenie, like Lizzie, is also from Tennessee, and she describes her plantation as being arranged by "families." After having her daughter sold off to another plantation, Reenie explains to Lizzie that she "fixed myself so he couldn't have no more childrens. My family helped me" (Perkins-Valdez 57). In the end, Reenie, who is without any claim to her children, escapes slavery, her life as a concubine, and Sir with Mawu.

Lizzie was aware of the reasons each of the men gave for the women coming along to Tawawa. She knew that Drayle told that she was to accompany him on the trip in order to cook for him, Sweet was brought along to mend her master's socks, Reenie's "man" didn't offer a reason as he had no wife, and Lizzie was not aware of Tip's excuse for bringing Mawu, but she knew an excuse would be given. Each woman knew the game she was playing, but the way in which they participated differed largely due to their

experiences. Each woman/slave/mother reveals “love” outside of the traditional sense which allows readers to imagine the complexity of the relationships between slave women and their masters and their children. Mawu sees her ability to best “love” her child by being a free woman. Reenie associates love with her lost child who was sold away and with her created family on the plantation. Sweet provides the most traditional image of love as it is bestowed upon her children and as she is emotionally wrecked by the loss of her surviving children. Lizzie’s love is complicated for a multitude of reasons which includes her relationship with Drayle, her role as a mother, and her lack of blood relatives. The obstacles faced by each woman become representative of a larger body of slave women.

As each of these women shares her experiences, Lizzie is reminded of how her life differs from her friends’ lives. After listening to Reenie’s story, Lizzie reflects on her life with Drayle and how it was for her:

So different from what she had with Drayle. She loved him. He loved her. And even more, he was good to her. Hadn’t he fixed the leaky cabin roof that was dripping on his children’s heads? Hadn’t he given the slaves Sunday mornings off when she told him about their secret worship meetings? Hadn’t he rubbed her feet countless times when she was tired from cooking all day? Hadn’t he protected her after she was attacked on the ship? (Perkins-Valdez 57)

In this dialogue, and throughout the text, Lizzie recalls receiving compassion and concern when she thinks back on life with Drayle. While the works of Jacobs and Morrison reveal the sexual brutality of slavery, Perkins-Valdez’s protagonist perceives her

experience to be something different. However, the expected brutality is evident in the lives of the women Lizzie meets, and Lizzie's relationship with Drayle explores new facets of brutality. Each of the women brings her horror from the South right into the free state of Ohio in the North. Their stories reflect their struggles, and the assaults suffered at Tawawa House prove that slavery is not tied to a region, but it is tied to a people, and where slavery's ideals are practiced, there it also thrives.

Whereas Morrison's text represents those who survived the journey to freedom, the women in Perkins-Valdez's text also represent a collective community. These women represent an even more marginalized group of slave women as they are concubines in a free state. According to Stevenson, this position as concubine is important to understand as it directly impacted a range of experiences based on the woman's different role in the family and community. Stevenson explains the experience of concubines:

It also deepens the connection between her experiences and those of other enslaved people across time, place, and culture. Opening the door to this aspect of a female slave's sexual experiences exposes her ideas about her body as a location of pleasure, production, and procreation as well as a site of exploitation alienation, loss, and shame. A study of concubinage also can suggest much about the internal dynamics of the slave family and community. (102)

Therefore, the role of concubine not only creates a forced relationship between master and slave, but it also impacts the woman's position as to whether she would be accepted or ostracized by others enslaved on the plantation. Stevenson explains that women who

were chosen as concubines were often chosen based on physical characteristics, often resembling those of northern Europeans. Light skin, straight hair, and fine lips were among those favored looks. This was the case with the description of Harriet Jacobs's appearance as written by Dr. Flint on his reward posters, and these women are most often targeted when reaching puberty. "As such, slaveholding men could assure the 'sexual purity' of their conquests and impose a type of psychological control" (Stevenson 106). This was specifically the case with Harriet Jacobs who describes reaching puberty as an especially sad phase in a slave girl's life; however, Lizzie's description is different as she is said to be darker in skin, covered with moles and bears a "mannish face" (Perkins-Valdez 10). This description of how Lizzie perceives herself highlights her satisfaction with having been "selected" to be Drayle's woman. Regardless, Drayle first visited Lizzie at age 13, and his visits continued from that time on. She is specifically aware of her body as she discusses with pleasure the changes that motherhood brings about in her larger breasts and more rounded out figure. Lizzie notices these changes and is aware of the way in which the other men on the plantation see her in a new way now also. (Perkins-Valdez 115-116). Drayle was responsible for Lizzie's newly sexualized body, and there were psychological implications that accompanied the physical changes.

Lizzie's memory of her first encounter with Drayle consists of when she was sleeping in the storeroom off the kitchen. Drayle unexpectedly passes by one night and offers her a glass of water. After offering the glass each night, he then brings a large jar of water and finally delivers the water and sleeps next to her. As Stevenson suggests, the master's advancements on young girls begins to psychologically impact them. Lizzie has only known life at her "Big Mama's," her maternal figure's home, and now she finds

herself in a new setting that is filled with Drayle's visits, gifts of water, and sexual advancements. After offering the water a second time, Lizzie explained that it "made her think for a moment that he was being kind" (Perkins-Valdez 90). Vulnerable, as a child at 13, Lizzie begins to interpret kindness, and possibly even love, with one's actions and gifts.

Because the reader is faced with the factual, historical nature of slavery, and with the current horrors of slavery as relayed by Reenie, Sweet, and Mawu, it is difficult to understand how Lizzie could be so confused as to think she had an actual, reciprocated relationship with Drayle. However, in understanding the nature of concubinage relationships, it becomes apparent that the relationship formed and was maintained for a multitude of reasons.

Lizzie's definition of love was closely tied to what one could provide for another. This is displayed throughout her life. She remembers Big Mama losing her eyesight after Lye splashed in them. As a result, "she stayed close by Big Mama's side, filling in for the old woman's eyes" (Perkins-Valdez 88). Later, when Lizzie remembers a relationship with another slave, Baby, she recalls the "most tender moment of their relationship had been when he brought her a dead squirrel for supper" (89). Lizzie loved Big Mama, so she "gave" her eyes to serve Big Mama, and Baby showed his affection for Lizzie by giving her a squirrel. As a result, it is no surprise that she interprets Drayle's gift and provision of water as kindness, and possibly even love. Unlike Jacobs, Lizzie does not wish to give herself to Drayle as a means to be in control of her body. Jacobs expressed that it "seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion" (85). As previously noted, Jacobs used her ability to choose in order to solidify her

resistance as a woman and as a mother. Lizzie, however, does not resist Drayle in the same way. Instead, Lizzie is likened to Jacobs in the fact that she does not simply succumb to a man because he forces her to, but she willingly courts a man who attempts to (selfishly and manipulatively) romance her and possesses the ability to free her children. As a result, Lizzie's relationship supports the fact that not all concubine relationships were physically coerced. However, as Chase-Riboud expresses in *Sally Hemings*, there were other ways these relationships were tainted due to the nature of the peculiar institution. As Stevenson explains, "Slaveholders had many ways to gain control of, and manipulate, an enslaved woman's sexual loyalties. These men approached them when they were young girls, naïve, vulnerable and certainly frightened" (117). Such was the case with the 13 year old Lizzie. Later, empty promises of emancipation and material incentives were alternatively used to entice women into relationships while others used brute physical force. An understanding of the social, emotional, and psychological tactics used in addition to physical force in these slave/master relationships provides insight into the confusion and complexity of the relationship between Drayle and Lizzie. At times she seems to think she loves Drayle, and at other times, she appears to detest and want to kill him.

The relationships between Reenie, Sweet, and Mawu and their masters show the physical force used by the slave master to overpower his concubine. While these relationships depict the expected violence, they are no less horrific. When Reenie is made a sexual slave to her master and to the manager at Tawawa House, all of the women recognize "the look" on Reenie's face (Perkins-Valdez 53). They know women who have lost their children and their control over their bodies. Mawu's public rape, beating,

and humiliation by her master, Tip, is the most obvious example of brute physical force, and it is Mawu's stoic and heroic resistance to Tip that spurs his ever-present, yet unsuccessful desire to break her. Lastly, Sweet's physical abuse does not compare to Mawu's in the text, but the fact that she arrives at Tawawa House pregnant with her fifth child with her master reveals that she is at the "sexual mercy" of her master (Harris 99). These women have no emotional ties to their masters; however, their masters have great ties to them, their beloved property. Tip savagely beats and rapes Mawu when he learns she was considering escaping and becomes enraged and bellows, "That's my property!" when Sir slaps Mawu for speaking out against Reenie's being handed over to the manager. Therefore, Mawu, fighting the physical battle that Lizzie is fighting emotionally and psychologically, shows that resistance is met with more force and desire by the slaveholder. These expected relationships between the other women and their men, that depict the horrors of slavery, create a great deal of controversy and confusion when juxtaposed with the relationship between Lizzie and Drayle.

The value of material goods is repeated throughout the text. In the exchange above, Tip becomes angry because his "property" (Mawu) is potentially damaged when Sir slaps Mawu for intervening in his decision to hand Reenie over to the manager. However, at the same time, Sir is empowered, because he possesses a property (Reenie) that someone else values and wants to use. The value associated with each man's belongings becomes evident as they are only noted as arguing over property. Lizzie even says that the presence of the other men causes Drayle to act more harshly when he learns of Phillip's trips away from the resort to meet with the woman he loves. Because there are other men present, Lizzie assumes Drayle will have to take a more stern approach to

punishing Philip in order to save his reputation as being in control of his property (Perkins-Valdez 212). As the men speak about their women as property, the women are reminded of what their commodification means for their families. Because, as Jacobs and others noted, legal status of the slave mother was designed to protect white fathers:

The newborn would follow the status of its mother...but that stroke of legal genius while assuring hegemony of the dominant class, did nothing to establish maternal prerogative for the American female. The child, though flesh of her flesh, did not “belong” to her...For the American female, the various inflections of patriarchalized gender---“mother,” “daughter,” “sister,” “wife”—are not available in the historical stance. (Spillers 232)

As Dawkins notes, the slave woman is reminded that her only authority over her children is negative as it insists upon their continued enslavement. Because she has no authority to claim them, her only power has to be to doom them (795). The women understood that though “they were his children...they were also his property. And like most property they could be replaced” (Perkins-Valdez185). Such a reading supports Mawu’s decision to “fix herself” so that she could not have more children, Reenie’s decision to run away because she had only one daughter who had already been sold away from her, and Sweet’s decision to kill herself after losing her fifth child. However, this reading of maternal influence as only negative authority does not support Lizzie’s rationale to remain loyal to Drayle. It only suffices if it is understood that Lizzie rejects the view of herself as having only negative authority. Therefore, she views herself as being in a position to provide something positive for her children. Unlike the protagonists in the texts of Jacobs and Morrison, Lizzie does not view death as being better than slavery.

Although she does take measures to abort what she believes to be her third child with Drayle during the last summer visit to Tawawa, she does not consider death for herself or for her other children. When she contemplates killing the unborn child, her mind actually wanders to killing Drayle instead. She considers killing him on two different occasions. This proves that Lizzie associates the problem not with her maternity, but with Drayle's paternity. Other than with the life of this third, unborn child, Lizzie is a proponent of life. After telling Drayle of Mawu's plan to run away, she rationalizes her decision by saying "if she hadn't [told], Mawu might be dead. If she [Mawu] had run and been caught, there was no doubt in Lizzie's mind that her friend wouldn't have allowed herself to be taken alive" (Perkins-Valdez 81). Consequently, Lizzie used her position as Drayle's confidant to protect her friend from death, a circumstance Mawu presumed better than her current role.

By taking the role of Drayle's influencer, Lizzie situates herself as a sort of puppet master. Lizzie's relationship with Drayle provided her with a means of acceptance as she learned that she could use her position as concubine/favored slave to provide for others. She sets Drayle into motion in order to protect, as Lizzie sees it, her friend, Mawu. He keeps Mawu from escaping, which is exactly what Lizzie desired. She struggles with the consequence that Mawu is forced to endure, but they come as the result of her master, Tip, and not Drayle. Tip is the one who beats and rapes Mawu, not Drayle. As a result, Lizzie has the ability to rationalize Drayle as the one who saved Mawu and Tip as the one who hurt her. Similarly, Lizzie is the one who convinces Drayle to provide for others on the plantation: "If someone was sick down in the quarters, they asked Lizzie to whisper the news to him so the person would be granted a reprieve.

Another time, Lizzie convinced Drayle to let the slaves have extra rations of meat” (Perkins-Valdez 105). Just as Sally Hemings used her influence over Thomas Jefferson to make political moves, Lizzie also used her position to provide for others. As she provided for the people on the plantation, she was more accepted by them.

As Deborah Gray White explains, “the most enduring relationships [in the slave community] were those existing between female blood kin” (132). In an early conversation with Mawu, Lizzie reveals that she, unlike Mawu never knew her birth mother: “She died before I remember. But I’ve got other ones. Aunt Lu raised me before I came to the Drayle place. Then after I was sold, Big Mama became my mammy. But when I moved into the big house...” (Perkins-Valdez 11). This conversation shows the great disconnect between Lizzie and any birth kin. Lizzie later communicates her solidarity when she is attacked by Baby when she is back in the slave quarters. She is reminded of her powerlessness and her lack of kinship when she realizes she has no one to threaten Baby:

Sleeping in the slave quarters meant she was subject to its rules. She could appeal to the elders. She could try to get somebody to beat him. But she had no family. Some women had brothers who provided this protection. Others had lovers who let it be known their women were not to be messed with. Lizzie had no one.

Except Drayle. (Perkins-Valdez 149)

Unlike Jacobs, who had Aunt Martha, and Sethe who had Halle and Baby Suggs, Lizzie presents herself as being truly alone. She does not even have one of the arranged plantation “families” that Reenie described. Though Lizzie regarded Philip as a brother,

he was guarded in his relationship with Lizzie as he did not want it to create problems for him because of her relationship with Drayle. Due to this fact, Lizzie's relationship with Drayle provided her with her only source of kinship. He literally provided a familial connection by making it possible for Lizzie to meet her biological sister, Polly, and he manipulated and encouraged her isolation from others in order to suit his own desires. Drayle even welcomed his wife, Fran's, infatuation with Lizzie's children because it allowed him to have more uninterrupted time with Lizzie. As a result, Lizzie had even more incentive to lean heavily on her relationship with Drayle in order to have community. However, as she draws closer to Drayle, Lizzie is being further ostracized. This becomes most obvious in the final pages of the text following the escape of Mawu and Reenie. Lizzie notes that Drayle changed immediately toward her once her friends ran off. He barked orders at her, locked her in a room and even chained her to the porch. He even says earlier in the text that the women should have never been allowed to go into Dayton. Any community Lizzie has creates a potential loss for Drayle as other relationships stand to divide her attention and more importantly, her loyalty to him. This behavior speaks directly to the psychological control discussed by Stevenson. Lizzie was so impacted by this relationship with Drayle that she also began to view others differently. After receiving the gifts and luxuries provided by Drayle, "she felt she was something else" (Perkins-Valdez 94). Because she had no blood kinship, there was nothing tying her to her status. The cycle continued as time progressed; however, it may be argued that Lizzie, like Sally Hemings, learned to use the cycle of giving in order to get what she also wanted.

Because Lizzie's relationships on the plantation are limited, she associates

kinship, not with blood relatives, but with caregivers. As a result, the person who provided for her and cared for her became her maternal/familial figure. With the loss of Big Mama, Lizzie had no other blood relatives on the plantation before the birth of her children, so her closest relationship was with Drayle and later it is only with those on the plantation who accepted her based on what she could provide for them. As she recognizes Drayle's gifts to her, she begins to mock his ability to provide in order to show her love for others. She does this with the women at Tawawa House, with other slaves on the plantation, with Phillip, and with her own children.

The ability to give and take becomes Lizzie's currency for love. It could be argued that she learned this from Drayle since he is her source of kinship. She remembers Drayle once buying a "beautiful woman" for a slave on the plantation because his wife had died in childbirth. The woman was a gift who was "intended to salve the older man's grief" (Perkins-Valdez 212). Therefore, a material "gift" is used to absorb the emotional loss. Later, it is Lizzie who pleads with Drayle in order to provide freedom for Philip. She pleads, "Drayle, you've got to free him. You know it. You've got to free that man" (Perkins-Valdez 202). When Drayle will not give the "yes" Lizzie desires, which thwarts her ability to provide for Philip, she withholds herself from him, "and that was the way it was that night. And that was the way it would be for a few nights more" (Perkins- Valdez203). Because Lizzie has always associated giving as an act of love, she reinforces that here by withholding herself in order to show her dissatisfaction. When this tactic does not give Lizzie the desired results, she later changes her method: "eager to convince Drayle to end his punishment of Philip...She had decided to try the tactics she'd used on him in the service of her children. She would not refuse him this time" (Perkins-

Valdez 218). She resigns to give herself to him in order to get what she wants, and she eagerly provides for him by pulling off his socks and boots and massaging his feet (Perkins-Valdez 218). Once Drayle reveals his decision to free Philip, she “gives” even more by then kissing the toe she was massaging. Though Lizzie seems to genuinely care for Drayle early in the novel, her willingness to acknowledge her use of tactics to get what she wants and what those around her want shows her as one who is using her position, possibly even subconsciously, to facilitate her own empowerment. After all, it was Drayle who taught Lizzie that one’s word was based on actions. He told her not long after having sex with her for the first time that he would “do” anything for her (Perkins-Valdez 100). Therefore, he set the precedence that one’s actions prove one’s level of commitment to another. As a result, the books, food, passes to visit her sister, etc. are all given to Lizzie by Drayle in order to prove his allegiance to her. Lizzie then applies this same notion to her other relationships. Her ability to provide for other slaves on the plantation alleviates their hardships and wins her acceptance. When Sweet learns all of her children have died, it is Lizzie who gathers the cloth for the babies’ gowns and it is Lizzie who gathers the loaf of bread and creamed corn. When words failed to comfort Sweet, Lizzie turned to objects to fill Sweet’s maternal void. This is precisely what Lizzie had observed earlier on her own plantation.

This system of giving in order to get what one wants is most explicitly revealed when Drayle states, “I gave you your sister. Now you give me a son” (Perkins-Valdez 103). He later reiterates this as he tries to coerce Lizzie into sexual acts that she finds immoral and detestable by telling her, “If you loved me like you say you do, this wouldn’t be a problem” (133). Therefore, Lizzie is constantly having the idea that “love

does things” reinforced. As a mother, this notion continues. Though Lizzie does not want to engage in those sexual acts with Drayle, “her children were receiving special treatment, and she knew Drayle could stop it if he wanted to” (Perkins-Valdez 133). She sees her “giving” to Drayle as a way to provide for her children as they “drank milk and ate the best cuts of meat” (Perkins-Valdez133). To deny Drayle was to stop providing for her children. Consequently, Lizzie is willing to sacrifice her own self-preservation in order to make sure her children are provided for and remain privileged.

The relationship, or lack thereof, between Lizzie and her children became more complicated as Fran assumed the maternal role for Lizzie’s children, Nate and Rabbit. Lizzie preserves her authoritative role over her children by associating it with her ability to provide the privileges of milk, sweets, berries, and clothing through her relationship with Drayle. However, as Drayle’s wife, Fran, becomes more involved with the children, Lizzie has fears. She asks Dessie, the cook, “What if her children mistook this for real love?” (Perkins-Valdez 134). Lizzie recognizes that love associated with gift-giving is not true love when she sees it happening to her children, but she does not realize this about herself until she spends several summers with the women at Tawawa House. The children, as a result of their privileges with Fran, no longer associated with the other slave children:

Nate kicked dirt at them [the other slave kids]. And dared them to kick it back. The children did not dare, for they knew this threat was real. He would tell Miss Fran. Or Bossman Robers. Or his *pa*. Nate had finally realized that Drayle was something more than his master. Rabbit simply refused to speak to other girls her age. (Perkins- Valdez 137)

As a result, Lizzie became concerned for the children's well-being. Though she wanted freedom for them, she also wanted them to be prepared for a life on the plantation. This desire for her children to reap the benefits of privilege while being prepared for slave life created conflict for Lizzie as a maternal figure.

On one occasion, Lizzie disciplines Nate for lying about taking a ribbon from his sister. When Fran sees Lizzie strike Nate, she "slapped Lizzie on the face hard" and tells her, "Don't you ever touch my children again, do you hear me?" (Perkins-Valdez 139). This language and encounter solidifies Lizzie's position as a secondary maternal figure, at most. However, the children's receptiveness to Fran's gift-giving mirrors Lizzie's receptiveness to the gifts she receives from Drayle. She explains, "The children still craved Lizzie's attention, but they preferred the time they spent with Fran because she gave them things" (Perkins-Valdez 138). Lizzie tries to force the children to remember their blood connection to her by secretly making them continue their chores; however, the children are swept into the notion that love is based on what one can provide for another. After a little while of the kids being reminded by Lizzie that they were to "follow the status of its [their] mother," they explained things to Fran, and she put a stop to Lizzie's plan.

Possibly, as was the case with Sally Hemings's three children who were never granted freedom by Jefferson but were allowed to "stroll" from Monticello and "pass" as white, Lizzie hoped for more for her children. The release of Hemings's children actually "ensures not only the concealment of his own paternity but also the severance of his children's ties with their maternal line...the Hemings children can claim neither father nor mother; their only safety lies in 'disappearing' into the anonymity of white America

(Dawkins 796). Lizzie specifically wants freedom for her children, but she does not want it at the cost of them roaming with neither mother nor father nor race. When Fran pushes Nate and Rabbit aside with the arrival of her nephew, Lizzie takes to hitting Nate and helping him learn the way of the slave boy (Perkins-Valdez 151). In doing this, Lizzie reclaims her maternal position with the children by stripping them of the luxuries Fran had provided. She sells the clothes the children had been given, and then she begins to try to mend their disappointment by bringing them treats from the house (Perkins-Valdez 151). In this exchange, the children again seem to have maintained their mother's understanding of love as the loss of the clothes brings a disappointment that can only be appeased by the provision of another object, which is food. However, by the fourth summer spent at Tawawa House, Lizzie's role as the maternal provider has strengthened and shifted.

In the final summer at Tawawa House, Lizzie no longer speaks of Drayle in the same romanticized language she used when she first met Reenie, Mawu, and Sweet. When she first meets the women, she often discusses circumstances in the way she wants them to be rather than the way they are in reality. Many times Lizzie recounts the goodness of "her man" (Perkins-Valdez 15). As she does so, it becomes clear that she specifically chooses to remember that which suits her purposes. Lizzie refers to Drayle as "her man," but Mawu reminds her that he's not: "He's not your man, you know" (Perkins-Valdez 15). Lizzie quickly explains she knows this already. However, this idea of romanticizing her relationship continues throughout the novel. When Lizzie shares Mawu's plan to escape with Drayle, he becomes angry, but "she forgave him for it. He loved her, and he was afraid she would leave him, too. That was what made him so

upset. Her leaving. His beloved Lizzie. The mother of his children” (Perkins-Valdez 66). In this exchange, Lizzie creates dialogue for the way she believes Drayle perceives her and values her. She similarly casts her view of her specific slave/master relationship the night when Sweet gives birth to her baby. She assumes the father might like to be present. Upon hearing this, the ladies quickly inform her that in reality, he would be angry to be bothered in the night by such petty information. Even Glory, the white Quaker woman whose husband is a farmer who supplies dairy products to Tawawa, can read Lizzie’s character. Glory tells Lizzie that she is also lonely without many friends; however, Lizzie quickly asks why Glory would think such a thing. The only time she seems to realistically view herself is when she acknowledges her status as a “traitor” among the women and slaves after she exposes Mawu’s plan to escape. Therefore, this creation of an idealized relationship with Drayle impacts her ability to objectively analyze her own reality. While she often realizes her circumstances are different from the women and their men, she cannot adequately gauge her own life and freedom.

Once Sweet is dead and Reenie and Mawu have escaped, Lizzie returns to Tawawa with Drayle and Fran. Lizzie is pregnant on this trip and does not want to keep the baby. However, after some thought, she realizes she would like to kill Drayle rather than the baby. After all, “He was the one who had gotten her into this mess. He was the one who had been lying to her for all these years, who wouldn’t let her children go free” (Perkins-Valdez 247). Throughout this last section of the text, Lizzie finds multiple flaws with Drayle. They are all flaws she deems he should die for, and for the first time, she makes no excuse for him. On three different occasions she contemplates killing him or at least desires to kill him.

This move from using her relationship with Drayle to get what she wants and to provide for others has also matured. Lizzie's role as a mother has taken a new direction. She still considers what she may provide for her children, but it is no longer focused on fleeting joys like blueberries and milk. Instead, Lizzie recalls the words of her previous maternal figure, Big Mama. Lizzie will not kill Drayle, and it is not because she does not want to, but she decides not to kill him because Big Mama once told her "that the sins of the mother and the father rained down on the heads of the children" (Perkins-Valdez 247). Lizzie will not cause her children to carry on what she has had to endure. She sees right through Drayle's plan to educate Nate. While she is happy to hear that he will be educated, she knows he will not be granted official freedom and that Rabbit will remain his "bait" to always return back to Tennessee.

As a result, Lizzie decides what she will teach her daughter:

Don't give in to the white man. And if you have to give in, don't give your soul over to him. Love yourself first. Fix it so you don't give him no children. If you ever make it to freedom, remember your mammy who tried to be good to you. Hold fast to your women friends because they are going to be there when ain't nobody else there. If you don't believe in God, it's all right. God believes in you. Never forget your name. Keep track of your years and how old you are. Don't be afraid to say how you feel. Learn a craft so you always have something to barter other than your private parts. (Perkins-Valdez 287-288)

The ideas of importance in the list above are based on Lizzie's lived experience. It beckons the words of Sally Heming's daughter, Harriet, in dialogue with her

granddaughter: “like the secrets that slave women must transmit to their daughters of the next generation so that they will survive. I couldn’t die without someone I loved knowing and remaining on the earth with that knowledge” (Chase-Riboud quoted in Dawkins 445). Lizzie is creating a blood kinship connection with her daughter that she lacked with her own mother. As a result, like Harriet and Sally Hemings, Lizzie is creating “not only a racial memory of trauma but also the knowledge of their indissoluble connection” (Dawkins 805). This knowledge of her maternal connection to her children is important as Lizzie does not seek escaping or passing as the means of freedom for her children or for herself. She desires their freedom and demands that they have an identity. Nate, named after Drayle, will carry his father’s name, and Rabbit and Nate will know their mother.

When Lizzie leaves Tawawa House following the third summer’s visit, she leaves with gifts for her children. However, this time, she takes gifts that will have a lasting impact on them. She does not take candy that will be a fleeting pleasure. Instead, she takes a slate board and two pieces of chalk. As Mia Bay explains, Sally Hemings “is largely a ciper—a blank slate on which any story can be written” (408). The same is true of Lizzie’s view of her children. They are not only symbolic of the many faces of concubines in Antebellum America, but they are also literally blank slates on which any future may be written. In this view of her children, Lizzie, like Sally and Harriet Hemings, moves beyond the role of influencer in her relationship with Drayle to one in which she uses her resistance to “undercut Southern patriarchal authority” and gain political agency” (Dawkins 800). Sally Hemings used her position to persuade Jefferson to convince the Governor of Virginia to exile rather than execute a large number of slave

insurrectionists. Similarly, Harriet Hemings used her husband's name to keep bounty hunters from returning two fugitive slaves to slavery. She also later receives his permission to establish an Underground Railroad station (Dawkins 800). Although Lizzie is unable to make such large political moves with Drayle, she does use what Drayle gave her to fuel her own political aspirations.

In his first year of visits, Drayle gifts Lizzie books and teaches her to read. As a result of his instruction and access to read, Lizzie is able to read the abolition pamphlet in Ohio. She not only reads the pamphlet herself, but she also reads it to the other women. She packs the pamphlet in her bag along with the blank slate. Drayle knows nothing about these gifts as Lizzie has realized, "She had been putting her faith in Drayle to free her children. Now she had to put her faith in herself" (Perkins-Valdez 290). In this newfound role in which Lizzie assumes herself powerful, she sounds like Harriet Hemings, "Had I not saved ten black men from certain death? I had power" (Chase Riboud-229). Lizzie insists in her own power to secure freedom for her children. She would no longer depend on Drayle to free her children; she would use the tools her relationship with him had provided. Reading is the first weapon, securing her maternal lineage with her children is the second, and igniting a fire for freedom is the last.

On the ride home from Tawawa House, Lizzie thinks of her plan for the pamphlet. She decided to put it away somewhere safely for the next couple of years until Nate is a little older. Then she would give it to him, "once he was a man, so that he too could feel the heat of the words and channel his young anger into the righteous fury of this Wendell Phillips" (Perkins-Valdez 238). Therefore, Lizzie will teach her children about abolition and activism. She will continue to stir their desire for freedom.

Just as Sally Hemings taught her daughter, Harriet, models for resistance, so, too, does Lizzie teach her children. Though distracted at times by the psychological and emotional distress of life as a concubine, Lizzie provides her children with all that she was denied: a mother, blood kinship, and love that transcends material gifts. She echoes the importance of maternal presence as Sethe's mother did in *Beloved* by showing her commitment to her children, even when faced with the opportunity to gain personal freedom. For each time escape crossed her mind, so did her children come to mind. However, Lizzie remained dedicated to being physically present with her children in order to provide for them and prepare them for the hardships of slavery. Though this decision was not understood by her own community of women at Tawawa, she persisted. In doing so, she modeled ways to resist slavery in discreet but significant ways: by insisting on Nate being named after his father; by determining to possess a strong love, and by thwarting the plans of slavery by spreading knowledge about language and abolition. Unlike Sally Hemings' granddaughter, Elizabeth, who speaks French rather than English as a means to "repudiate the language identified with her oppression," Lizzie masters the English language. For years Drayle corrected Lizzie's grammar usage, and she in turn corrected her children. As Drayle prepared to train Nate up as his favorite slave rather than his son, Lizzie delighted in the fact that "he talked like a white boy with nary a touch of slave in his speech" (Perkins-Valdez 244). Lizzie delighted not in the fact that Nate's language separated him from other slaves, but in the fact that despite the role Drayle assigned him, Nate was just as well versed in the language as his father. Also, his language and ability to read were tools that could spread and encourage abolitionist motives. Lizzie took those tools that were given to her and used each of them

in order to prepare her children for the day when they would seek the ultimate gift:
freedom.

CHAPTER 4

Mothering Resistance in Martin's *Property*

The texts of Harriet Jacobs, Toni Morrison, and Dolen Perkins-Valdez explore slave women as driven, powerful, and resistant mothers. Journeys from bondage to freedom are detailed or reimagined in these narratives. Whether that freedom be physical escape or an impending dream of escape, it is the focus and the desire of the characters. Each of these works considers what Morrison refers to as the “interior lives” of the enslaved as a means to understand the nature of slavery and the consequences of bondage. In Valerie Martin’s 2003 book, *Property*, the interior life is also examined; however, because it is narrated by Manon Gaudet, a white, unsympathetic Louisiana plantation owner, another interior life is made available to readers: the white slaveholding mistress. Morrison’s praise for the book, as printed on the cover of the first Vintage Contemporaries edition, states, “This fresh, unsentimental look at what slave owning does to (and for) one’s interior life must be a first” (Morrison quoted in Li 242). In making this comment, Morrison considers the white mistress’s voice as one of importance in exploring the “interior lives” of not only the enslaved, but also the enslaver. In understanding the “proceedings too terrible to relate,” Morrison explains she “must trust my own recollections” and she must “also depend on the recollections of others” (2293). Martin’s text provides insight into the “other.” Unable to draw from her enslaved ancestors, Martin “offers important insights into the lived experiences of antebellum slavery and its fraught gender dynamics” (Li 241). As a result, exposure of the life of the enslaver, along with the enslaved, provides additional detail to the picture

of antebellum life and the ways in which the peculiar institution directly impacted all of its inhabitants.

The previously discussed texts of Jacobs, Morrison, and Perkins-Valdez explore the often unusual ways in which the enslaved women retain control of their “propertyed” bodies once they become mothers. These mothers are resistant and persistent women who prevail and provide for their children in ways that are not always socially accepted and understood. They act and react in a world in which they are “property” and deemed powerless. However, they adapt definitions of womanhood and motherhood in order to suit their own needs and social conditions. While the white mistresses are named in these texts, their interior lives are largely missing. They are jealous, manipulative, and hateful as they watch their slave girls become the sexual property of their husbands. As a result, *Property*, coined a neo-enslaver novel by Stephanie Li, reveals the interior life of the white mistress (242). Such a viewpoint allows for a reading of the consequences of ownership in the Antebellum South as ownership impacts all women.

Property examines Manon Gaudet as both a property owner and as the property of her husband, while it simultaneously questions the possible victimization of the oppressor by the oppressed. For the purpose of this project, Martin’s work reveals the effects of maternal empowerment on the peculiar institution. When those, such as Manon’s slave, Sarah, who are presumed to be powerless become empowered as women and as mothers, the desire of the slaveholder to once again seize that authority becomes all consuming. This exposure of Manon Gaudet supports the previous depiction of the slave mother as purposeful and powerful as the white mistress in *Property* becomes obsessed with reclaiming her perceived loss of power to the slave mother, Sarah. In looking at the

relationship of power and ownership on the Gaudet plantation, it becomes evident that Sarah's role as mother and object of Mr. Gaudet's affection threatens Manon's perceived position as Mrs. Gaudet.

Admittedly, Valerie Martin shares that she is interested "in power struggles everywhere" and focuses specifically "on the relationships of power that exist between a slaveholding husband, his wife, and her mixed-race maid" (King 212). This need for increased authority on the part of the white mistress does not deny the slave mother's empowerment, but it in fact solidifies her resistance and spurs the white woman's obsession with reclaiming her position as master. Such a reading provides the previously discussed mothers of Jacobs, Sethe, and Lizzie, and now adding Martin's Sarah, as having the utmost influence over every aspect of plantation life as their personal empowerment elicits an even stronger desire to have control on the part of the slaveholder. Manon and her husband long to possess their slave Sarah. As their attempts to control her increase, Sarah remains emotionally and intellectually resistant making her truly unconquerable.

Property is set on a Louisiana sugar cane plantation in 1828. Manon Gaudet, the immature and self-consumed mistress of the Gaudet plantation narrates the text. Manon idealizes her deceased father and has a turbulent relationship with her own mother who chastises Manon for not succeeding according to the Cult of True Womanhood. Manon is childless, by circumstances and by choice, and she lacks religious faith. In fact, when she prays, it is only "to prove there is no Supreme Being who hears our prayers" (Martin 49). Lacking piety and domesticity, Manon remains pure in that she upholds her "sham of a marriage" for others. In action, Manon is submissive to her husband; however, her

thoughts, as revealed to the reader, leave no shadow of a doubt as to the way in which she deeply despises him. The most obvious way in which Manon dismisses her husband's value and necessity to her is through her decision to never call him by name throughout the text. She objectifies him by only referring to him with pronouns or simply as "my husband." She despises him and consistently depicts him as unimportant, shameful, incompetent with money, slovenly, and generally obnoxious. Manon continually notes the ways in which Mr. Gaudet falls short of her own father in his ability to care for his slaves, his crop, and his wife. When Manon learns her mother had charged her father with some "unforgivable" offense before he died, she unwaveringly defends her father's character and innocence. She recognizes the way in which he observed the cult of true womanhood and treated her mother as such:

Did he fail to consult her wishes in every matter that concerned her comfort? Did he fail to tolerate her dependence on a religion that struck him as cruel superstition? Did he fail, perhaps, to bring her some present when he went to the town?...Did any day go by when he did not compliment her, defer to her, inquire as to her preference or opinion? How was it possible that she should have let him live one hour with the certainty that she held some grievance against him? (Martin 88-89)

Such remarks reveal Manon's familiarity of the gender roles assigned to women and men. Manon knew the prescribed behavior roles, and as a result, she was aware of her own reluctance to submit to these roles. As she juxtaposes her marriage with that of her mother's, she is envious of her mother's treatment as a lady when she was "forced to live these ten years in the madhouse of his [Mr. Gudet's] cupidity, perversion, and lust"

(Martin 89). Manon repeatedly blames her husband for her inability to act as a true woman due to his behavior. Because he did not uphold the ideals of womanhood, she suffered the part. When Manon sees a doctor to understand her fertility issues, she tells the doctor she does not want children. Though this is the truth, Manon is startled in her answer as it is contrary to her role as woman. She even asks herself, “What sort of woman doesn’t want children?” (Martin 37) The answer she provides for this unnatural decision is that she despises her husband. As the doctor continues to play into the assigned gender role of women, he tells her that a child might provide her some sort of comfort. However, Manon simply becomes annoyed by the suggestion that a child might “secure my husband’s affections to me” (Marin 39). Manon can find no reason to have her own child with her husband, because a child is precisely the reason she gives as to why she despises her husband in the first place:

“Would the fact that the servant I brought to the marriage has borne him a son, and that this creature is allowed to run loose in the house like a wild animal, would that be, in your view, sufficient cause for a wife to despise her husband?” (Martin 38)

Manon despises her husband because he has a child with her slave, Sarah, and because she must face the child that resulted from this infidelity daily. The birth of Walter, Sarah and Mr. Gaudet’s child, changes many things for Manon. Before Walter was born, Manon could live under the cloud of her fertility problems being her husband’s fault. Not only did that please Manon, but it also satisfied her mother. However, once Walter was born, Mr. Gaudet could no longer be blamed for Manon’s childlessness, and Manon’s mother could then voice her deathbed complaint with Manon: that she had ultimately

failed as a woman. Her mother's words echo: "I recalled Mother's last words to me, her complaint that I had failed as a wife because I neglected my duties to my husband" (Martin 89). Walter becomes evidence against Manon's femininity. As Li puts it, "Walter is a daily reminder that Manon has no special sexual power over her husband" (246). This realization and physical evidence of a child spurs a power struggle in which Manon's desire becomes a need to not only possess Sarah but to possess her in the way her husband does.

Upon the visit of Joel Borden, an old friend of Manon's, he notes that she has not changed since he last saw her; however, Manon thinks of how much she has changed. Insinuating that life with her husband and the circumstances she has endured because of her husband have changed her greatly. Manon is filled with shame when Joel later sees Walter and notes his resemblance to her husband. She speculates the rumors that will be spread when Joel tells friends that "Manon Gaudet has no children, but her husband is not childless" (Martin 29). She eventually takes comfort in knowing that Joel will not share that information with her mother who would be even more distraught with Manon's failure as a woman. As a result, Manon, unlike Jacobs, Sethe, and Lizzie, is concerned with what is socially accepted. Although Manon has evidence that she is not alone in dealing with a husband who has relationships with his slaves, she cannot find her place. When she meets with the fertility doctor, he tells her that certainly she understands that she is not alone, and she later assumes that Sarah was given to her by her aunt because her uncle was either already involved with or showing interest in Sarah. Manon knows other women are dealing with the same situation, but she remains intent to hide her

husband's behavior in a means to protect her own reputation as a woman of the cult. She also struggles to remain confident that she is even the woman of the house.

Manon cannot escape the physical evidence of her husband's decision to be with Sarah because Walter appears continuously throughout the text. Walter interrupts conversations between Manon and Mr. Gaudet, meals with guests, quiet moments in the parlor, hostile moments of the insurrection, and moments of desperation when Manon is wounded following the insurrection. He violently enters rooms like a wild animal, wreaking havoc and making inappropriate and socially unacceptable pronouncements. Walter's appearance in the novel must echo his sporadic and continual appearance in Manon's thoughts. He elicits emotions of anger, fear, shame, sadness, and regret over what her life could have been had she married another man, a man who would not have taken up with his slave girl. As Manon watches him, she only becomes pleased at the thought of his failings and the possibility of him causing her husband shame. She wants her husband to feel the shame of his decision and to be reminded of his shameful deeds as she is reminded by his daily presence. Upon watching her husband discuss Walter with Dr. Landry, she explains:

My husband expressed the hope that some use might be made of the child as a servant, which was entirely news to me. My heart raced with anger, then I imagined Walter pitching dishes out the window and dumping mashed potatoes on the carpet, a thought I found so amusing it calmed me down. (Martin 43).

At other times, Manon observes Walter acting wildly and makes sarcastic comments such as "a charming child" to cause her husband to recognize that he is anything but charming

and civilized. However, Mr. Gaudet is never noted as possessing feelings of shame or remorse for having had the child.

Instead, it is Manon who goes above and beyond in an attempt to stop the relationship between Sarah and her husband. When Manon goes to visit her sick mother, she takes Sarah with her. Confused by Manon's decision to bring Sarah rather than leave her to assist Mr. Gaudet, Manon lies to her mother. She explains that she left Rose to care for her husband because "She's old enough. I left in such a hurry that was the last thing on my mind" (Martin 68). She also lies later when her mother asks who the father of Sarah's child is. Manon angrily erupts that she does not know. While Manon is attempting to appear very much in control of her affairs, her mother is continually remarking upon Manon's lack of control over her own home. Tired, possibly from her own self-examination, in addition to her Mother's, Manon explains, "I could not bear another lecture on my failings as a wife" (Martin 69). Manon's inability to leave Sarah, the object of her husband's desire, alone with her husband leaves her no choice but to bring her along to her mother's home, but then Sarah's presence with her child causes questioning from her mother. As a result, Manon finds herself unable to escape her husband's infidelity.

Evidence of the way Manon feels about her life is found in her reaction to the story of Sally Pemberly. The doctor who came to observe Walter's hearing ability shared the events of Sally Pemberly's divorce from her husband who was "so cruel even the servants pitied her" (Martin 44). Pemberly sued for her marriage portion and was granted it and "now has her own income and is free of her detestable husband" (44). This news made Manon envious as she considered Sally a "fortunate woman" (Martin 44). In this

scenario, Manon plays the role of the victim who is subjected to her husband's cruelty in his infidelity. The consequences of his insatiable sexuality have left her with a burden that has ruined and complicated her life to a point that requires escape in order for her to ever feel happiness again. Therefore, Manon perceives herself to be oppressed as she also desires to oppress others. Manon begins to associate her own freedom with the amount of control she possesses over another, and it is Manon's inability to fully possess Sarah's mind and body that causes her great distress.

Unlike Manon, Sarah's thoughts are not known to the reader. Manon is oblivious to Sarah's hardships while the reader realizes there is much more to Sarah than the narrator reveals. Manon only shares those aspects of Sarah's character that are of some relevance to her such as her relationship with Mr. Gaudet and her stubborn silence. While Manon views herself as a victim of her husband's ignorance, she does not recognize Sarah's position in her relationship to Mr. Gaudet. Sarah was given to the Gaudet's as a wedding gift from Manon's aunt, Leila. Manon and Aunt Leila focus on her cleaning abilities and her youth as not quite being 18 years of age. Later, on a reward poster that is created for Sarah, the escaped slave is described as "tall, slender, fine-featured, light complexion, speaks English and some French, ...has scar behind left ear..." (Martin 132). This physical description, accompanied with her young age, makes Sarah a likely victim of her master, especially considering the narrative of Harriet Jacobs as Sarah had, like Jacobs, entered "a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl" in reaching puberty (44). Just as Sherman notes, the serpent entered Sarah's life at puberty, and "he enters her white sister's at marriage" (182). It may be assumed that Sarah is wise to the fact that the white man is a sexual predator while Manon is oblivious. It is only after

Sarah becomes pregnant with Walter that Manon suspects her Aunt Leila may have had the same problem with her husband lusting after Sarah. This news of Sarah's pregnancy filled Manon with a series of questions:

I wonder how my aunt could have dealt my happiness such a blow. Did she imagine my husband was different from hers? Did she think that because I was young and pretty, I was proof against the temptations presented by Sarah? (Martin 19)

While Manon took pride in being in control of her staff, this exchange shows that she knew far less than they knew about plantation life. Manon's inability to fully dominate that which she does not understand becomes a theme throughout the text.

Manon recalls meeting her staff for the first time following her marriage to Mr. Gaudet, and her description of the encounter is based upon how each individual responds to her. She describes curious looks, clumsy bows, ill-fitting clothing, and missing eye contact; however, she dismisses Sarah's "expression of sullen expectation" that is directed at Mr. Gaudet because she does not yet know her role, which is to "civilize the baser instincts of man" (Carby 27). Sarah's pregnancy changes the roles of each of the women. However, it is Manon who is left stammering and wallowing at what she perceives should not have happened. Sarah, on the other hand makes immediate changes to show that she will prevail despite what she cannot control.

As the text unravels, it becomes clear, as intended by Martin, to address power struggles; however, it is Manon who is struggling to gain power. Gaudet has secured his position as man, whether respected by Manon or not, and Sarah has secured her role of

empowerment as mother. She cares for her children, which Manon will never have, and she controls her thoughts and utterances. As a result, Manon struggles to overpower Sarah, and in doing so, she reveals how much she fails to understand Sarah and literally becomes a failed version of Sarah. Both Sarah and Manon are entrapped by white patriarchy, and possibly it is white patriarchy that stands between women and happiness: “It seemed that happiness must always be just beyond me and I should always stand gazing in at it as through a shopwindow where everything glittered and appealed to me...” (Martin 138) However, the way in which the women view their happiness differs. Manon seeks to become the patriarchy that controls her, while Sarah seeks to escape the white patriarchy and its hierarchy.

When Mr. Gaudet questions what would happen to all women if he were not to exist, he places all women in the same category. He assumes Manon and Sarah are to suffer the same helplessness in his absence. However, Manon immediately begins to reinstate the hierarchy as she begins to think that Sarah must wonder what would become of her as Manon would be the new master. Upon the hypothetical absence of Gaudet, Manon immediately, in her mind, shoulders the most powerful position on the plantation. Manon then assumes Sarah’s reliance upon and acceptance of Manon as her master. This thought process proves faulty throughout the text as it is Manon who is more reliant upon Sarah than Sarah upon Manon.

On at least three occasions, Manon notes Sarah looking beyond her. On each of these occasions Sarah is wise to something that Manon has yet to understand. In the first instance, Sarah is said to be “looking past me” when she first meets Manon: however, she is looking at “my husband” as Sarah knows she will be the subject of his sexual desire

(Martin 20). The second time Manon observes that Sarah is “looking past me with a grimace of revulsion” as Sarah is the first to see that Manon’s mother has died and is leaking black bodily fluids (Martin 69). Lastly, after dropping the baby, Nell, from the window, Sarah “turned, her eyes wide, looking past me” as she knew the insurrection was underway (Martin 106). In each of these scenarios, Manon lacks the knowledge and foresight that Sarah already possesses. How could she possibly control Sarah when it is Sarah who is wise to reality? As a result, Manon is presented as being reactive in all situations. She is powerless, much to her own dismay, to stop anything from happening or even recognize what is currently occurring.

Throughout the text Sarah proves over and over again that she is wiser to life than Manon. When she first arrives to the Gaudet plantation, she, like Harriet Jacobs, attempts to skirt the advances of Mr. Gaudet by becoming romantically involved with Bam, the butler. Sarah’s decision to have Manon speak to her husband regarding a marriage between Bam and Sarah proved Sarah to be the facilitator of operations. It was Sarah who was using Manon as her pawn as she knew she could coerce Manon to do things on her behalf. After seeing her husband’s reaction to the request, Manon questions how she “could have been such a fool” to have not understood. This scenario once again proves Manon’s ignorance to a system she longs to dominate, but it also associates Sarah’s resistance with that of Harriet Jacobs who also found her own suitor and became pregnant in order to elude her master. Though Sarah’s attempt failed, it was the beginning to her resistance and the means to exposing Manon’s ignorance to gender roles. Manon, in direct correlation with the cult of true womanhood, blames Sarah for “sealing her fate” by becoming pregnant in order to spare her white husband any responsibility for his actions

(Martin 23). Such comments once again prove that Manon is reactive to events occurring around her.

Once Bam is sold and Sarah's child with Bam is sold, she becomes pregnant with Walter. As a result, according to Manon, she also "grew silent and more secretive" (Martin 24). As these changes take place in Sarah's character, Manon becomes more desiring of what may seem like a relationship between the two women. Sarah's resistance to speak makes Manon long to hear her more and have her closer. In the opening chapter, Manon has a crate moved into her room so that Sarah and her baby can stay near to her. Manon notes the decision "earned me one of the rare straight-forward looks that I take to mean she is pleased" (Martin 6). As a result, Li claims there is a reversal of the typical relationship between master and slave. Manon now seeks to please her master, Sarah. Manon longs to hear Sarah speak and notes, "when she bothers to speak, she makes sense" (Martin 6). This understanding of intelligence makes Manon want to join into conversation with Sarah as she repeatedly asks her questions throughout the text. The more Sarah refuses to speak and share, the more bothered Manon becomes. She tells her, "I hate when you pretend to be stupid," recognizing it is Sarah's resistance that stops her from speaking rather than her ignorance. Because Sarah's silence does not end with Manon's request, Manon begins to examine and observe her physical cues in order to know what Sarah might be thinking. When Manon shares with Sarah that Gaudet believes she is poisoning his food, she sees, "something flickered at the corner of her mouth; was it amusement?" (5-6). Li notes that this exchange marks Manon as more interested in the shape of her servant's mouth than with the possibility of her husband's death, suggesting that Manon is becoming more consumed and fascinated by Sarah's

physical presence and silence (243). Manon desires to hear Sarah speak, but she realizes she is powerless to make her speak, so she becomes satisfied with any other communication from Sarah. Later, Manon acknowledges Sarah's resistance when she admits to using a trick she learned from Sarah. When annoyed with Gaudet, Manon remarked that she "looked at him for a few moments blankly, without comment, as if he was speaking a foreign language" (Martin 8). Silence, then, becomes the repetitive tool of resistance used by the oppressed against the oppressor.

Manon is reliant upon Sarah for dialogue as she has little, if any of her own. This becomes even more obvious when Manon is sitting at her dressing table. Rattled after having seen Sarah leave her husband's room the night before, Manon is looking in her mirror. As Sarah brings her coffee, Manon notes that Sarah's "reflection obscured my own" (Martin 50). When she questions Sarah, Manon attempts to coerce Sarah to speak by appealing to Sarah's vanity, but it is obvious to the reader that Manon is the one who is self-absorbed. Similarly, Manon bumps Sarah's arm as she is lowering the cup of coffee, causing it to splash across the dresser. As a result, Manon abruptly asks Sarah, "Why are you so clumsy?" (Martin 50). In these exchanges, Manon creates failed attempts to cast her characteristics upon Sarah. She does so in order to regain control as she realizes she has become consumed by Sarah just as her reflection in the mirror has been replaced by Sarah's.

While the women once had the opportunity to be united in their hatred for Gaudet, they are again separated by their relationships with Gaudet. After seeing Sarah leave her husband's room hurriedly in the night, Manon is haunted by the sight:

The image of Sarah as I had seen her leaving my husband's room filled my head, banishing these unendurable recollections. Her hair was all undone, her eyes bright, she was wearing a loose dressing gown I'd never seen before and a dark mantle pulled over it. I had only the quickest look at her in the lamplight, but I'd seen a great deal. (48)

Despite the news of the barn burning, Manon seems more interested in the night activities of Sarah. She recalls her disheveled appearance and a gown she does not recognize, which insinuates that the gown might have been a gift from her husband. Li argues that Manon is most unnerved in this scene, because she realizes the familiarity with which her husband knows Sarah while she, Manon, is left to interpret silences and non-verbal physical movements. Sarah has taken Manon's place in the marital bed and as the mother of the master's children, which makes her a destabilizing fixture in Manon's life. As a result, Manon recognizes the limitation of her control over another, specifically Sarah. While she can order the movements of Sarah, she cannot fully possess her as her husband does.

Manon's desire to conquer what she feels is her rightful property, Sarah, echoes Dr. Flint's obsession with dominating Harriet Jacobs. The more Jacobs eludes Dr. Flint, the more obsessed he becomes with her and attempts to claim her as his own. Similarly, Manon continues to draw Sarah near. Sarah sleeps in Manon's room, travels with her to her mother's home, and serves her throughout the day. It may appear on the surface that Manon only does so in order to keep her husband from having access to Sarah; however, Manon does not love her husband or desire his conjugal visits. When she thinks back on their marriage, she describes their first sexual encounter as having no tenderness, but, she

was willing to endure them until she realized she was replaceable. Manon explains, “when I understood that my sense of having some particular value to him was a delusion, this willingness on my part became a source of deep humiliation” (Manon 152). Manon once felt that she had “some value, something more desirable to my husband than money,” but that changed once the two were married (Martin 150-51). Once she began medicating in order to sleep, she realized that she simply served a purpose for him but that any other could fulfill the same purpose. As a result, Gaudet stopped frequenting her bedroom and replaced their sexual relationship with his relationship with Sarah.

As Li acknowledges, “Gaudet has complete sexual dominion over both Manon and Sarah; in this respect, their positions are remarkably similar, as neither can accuse him of rape” (247). However, the white mistress has an option of escape that is unavailable to the slave woman. Manon has the ability to self-medicate. Similarly, Fran, in Perkins-Valdez’s *Wench* uses Lizzie’s children to preoccupy herself. Manon is no longer only jealous of Sarah’s position with her husband, but she is now also jealous of her husband’s position with Sarah. Therefore, it is not simply Sarah that Manon wants to dominate, but she wants to overpower her as only a man could do. That total physical and emotional power would give her the all-encompassing control that Manon so desires.

Manon recognizes Mr. Gaudet’s ability to have Sarah sexually, but she does not fully seem to understand the relationship. She says that Sarah “sealed it [her fate] herself shortly after I arrived by getting pregnant” (Martin 23). In this exchange, Manon blames Sarah for the sexual advances of her husband. In this dialogue, Manon once again depicts herself as ignorant to the ways of plantation life. She is either oblivious to or unwilling to accept the fact that Sarah is unable to protect herself from the rape of her

husband. Sarah's first pregnancy could be seen as a similar attempt made by Harriet Jacobs to choose the father of her child if she were to be forced to have one. This chosen relationship of Sarah's also humanizes her as it proves she is the one who is capable of love. Just as Harriet Jacobs chose to have children with Mr. Sands in order to avoid Dr. Flint, Sarah made a choice and made it clear that her choice was not Mr. Gaudet. The tenderness with which Sarah cares for Nell, the baby who is assumed to also be the child of Gaudet reaffirms the nature of Sarah as woman and as mother. As Manon longs to know more and hear more from Sarah, she is denied the pleasure her husband enjoys, but she is also denied the affection and attention Sarah chooses to bestow upon her children. Therefore, Sarah originally asserted her resistance by choosing a partner and father to her children, and now she chooses those to whom she gives her verbal utterances, love, and affection. Manon desires everything that Sarah denies her.

Sarah's maternal role and Manon's maternal turmoil provide an interesting situation between the two. The maternal line in Manon's family is long as Manon's mother is to be buried with her mother and her mother's parents; however, the maternal line ends with Manon. Her tumultuous relationship with her mother haunts her throughout the novel. Unable to meet the ideals of the cult of true womanhood, Manon is a continual disappointment to her mother. Following the gruesome death of Manon's mother, Sarah is the only maternal figure in the text. Though Sarah lacks her own maternal figure after having been sold as a slave multiple times, she becomes the only image of a successful mother. It is also Sarah's position as mother that haunts Manon's inability to possess Sarah as Gaudet has.

The most horrific scene of the novel occurs once Manon's mother has died.

Without a mother, Manon begins to nurse from Sarah's breast:

I dropped to my knees on the carpet before her and rested my hands upon her wrists. I could feel the smooth, round bones through the thin cloth of her sleeve. I leaned forward until my mouth was close to her breast, then put out my tongue to capture the drop.

It dissolved instantly, leaving on a trace of sweetness. I raised my hand, cupping her breast, which was lighter than I would have thought. It seemed to slip away from my fingers, but I guided the nipple to my lips and sucked gently. Nothing happened. I took it more deeply into my mouth and sucked from my cheeks.

This is what he does, I thought. At once a sharp, warm jet hit my throat and I swallowed to keep from choking. How thin it was, how sweet! (Martin 76)

As Li notes, this scene may be explained in multiple ways. Manon longs for the maternal figure who feeds her rather than turns her away and condemns her as her own mother did. Sarah does not deny Manon the milk, but at the same time, she does not offer it to her as a mother would to a nursing child. Manon guides the nipple to her mouth rather than the milk being offered to her. As a result, an interpretation of the scene as maternal comfort changes to a scene in which Manon seeks to overpower Sarah as a woman and as a maternal figure. When taking the milk, Manon thinks, "This is what he does" acknowledging that she is emulating her husband. Manon is now knowing Sarah in a way that had previously been denied: the way her husband possessed Sarah. In this very moment, Manon is the head of the household. Her mother is dead, her husband is away, and all that belongs to her mother is now hers, if only for a moment. She explains

“how wonderful” and “entirely free” she feels in the moment. A time which should have otherwise been sad, as it immediately followed the death of her mother, is a remarkable moment for Manon as she finds herself at the pinnacle of what she perceives as power. However, her satisfaction is only in relationship to Sarah.

This image of taking milk mirrors that of when Sethe’s milk is stolen by Schoolteacher’s nephews on Sweet Home Plantation in *Beloved*. Like in *Property*, the stealing of Sethe’s milk is one of the most horrific scenes in *Beloved*. Although no dialogue is given to Sarah in this scene, Sethe does give a great deal of dialogue following her experience. She explains to Paul D that the fact that the boys stole her milk was far more horrific than the physical beating she endured while pregnant. It was a violation that exceeded any other physical violation. In *Beloved*, the matriarch, Baby Suggs, condemns white people because they “don’t know when to stop” (Morrison 105). Because slaveholders “don’t know when to stop,” the slave has no faith in their morality, so she must decide when things have gone too far. Harriet Jacobs made the decision to hide in her grandmother’s garret, Sethe escaped and enforced freedom through infanticide, Perkins-Valdez’s Lizzie began abolitionist efforts, and Sarah decided it was time to escape. Because Sarah, unlike Sethe, has no voice in *Property*, to tell how this encounter affected her, Manon is allowed to remain indifferent to the extent of the crime she has committed. However, Sarah’s actions speak for her as she, like Sethe in *Beloved*, chooses to escape the plantation once her milk was stolen by Manon.

As tradition held, Sarah was most likely unable to nurse from her own mother. As a result, her milk was her maternal empowerment. Once Manon attempts to violate this area of empowerment, Sarah reacts, much like Sethe with violence. This encounter

solidifies Sarah as the maternal icon, but it also solidifies Manon's refusal of the patriarchal system as she violates Sarah's maternal body by taking her milk just as the boys did in *Beloved*. In this rejection of the patriarchal system, Manon makes it clear that she does not reject slavery. Instead, she wants its power. There can be no sisterhood between the women because she wants to own Sarah in the exact way her husband does. As Li explains, "Manon's whiteness is built upon her emulation of patriarchy's sexual assault on black women" (251). Therefore, in her refusal of the patriarchy, she pursues to become the patriarchy.

Manon's consumption of Sarah's milk mirrors the image of Mr. Gaudet and the patriarchy as consumers. Throughout the text, men are continually depicted as consumers in the way that they eat and drink. On numerous occasions, Manon describes Mr. Gaudet's hunger as ravenous. As she watches him "shove in ham, hominy, potatoes, eggs, and griddle cakes," she juxtaposes her lack of appetite as she only "ate a piece of bread" (Martin 14). Watching Gaudet consume disgusts Manon to the point that she often either will not eat or requests to eat her food later in her bedroom. As this consumption of food parallels his consumption of power, Manon's desire for power is exemplified through her thirst. Once Manon's mother is dead, she thirsts for Sarah's milk. In that moment, she has all the power of the patriarchy. Manon's pursuit of patriarchal power is further displayed once her husband is dead. Following the bloody insurrection and witnessing her husband's murder, Manon tells Delphine she is "dying of thirst" (Martin 120). Later, upon the arrival of Gaudet's coffin to Manon, she explains that "though it hurt to eat, I was ravenous" (Martin 125). Now that Gaudet is gone, Manon is thirsty and hungering for all the power that he had previously consumed.

While Manon desires to become the patriarchy, Sarah literally kills it. On the night of the insurrection, it is Sarah who points out the whereabouts of Gaudet to the guard. She tells him “he there,” sending the Captain to murder Gaudet. Just moments before, Sarah had collided with Walter and “struggled to free herself. ‘Let me go,’ she cried, kicking the creature, who released her, wailing in distress” (Martin 114). In this exchange, Sarah freed herself of her child, but also freed herself of Walter, the offspring and embodiment of the patriarchy. Following these encounters, Sarah ran with baby Nell in arms away from the scene. Once again looking beyond Manon, Sarah ran for a horse for her own escape. Manon, in her thirst for power, remained full of questions and unaware of reality. Once Sarah has mounted the horse and escaped with her baby, Manon is left asking questions: “Where had she learned to ride like that? What direction would she take? Was she going for help?” (Martin 114) Manon is so consumed with Sarah that she seems to be unaware of all that is happening around her and these questions reveal that there was even more she did not know about Sarah. There were endless facets of Sarah that Manon had still not conquered. Even after watching her husband fall to his death and enduring the bone-crushing sound of a knife entering his skull, her mind is preoccupied with memories and images of Sarah:

I could see Sarah’s face, her lips pulled back over her teeth like a snarling dog as she struggled with me. “They will kill me,” I said, but she wasn’t listening, or didn’t hear. No, I thought. She heard me well enough. It was her hope that they would kill me. (Martin 117)

This exchange reiterates how little Manon understands about the true occurrences of plantation life and also affirms Yaeger’s formulation of the “white unseeing.” Following

Sarah's escape, Manon is haunted by the vision of Sarah's face as the two women struggled. However, Manon cannot seem to understand why Sarah chose to run. "My husband is dead, I thought. Why would she run now, when she was safe from him? It didn't make sense" (Martin 127). In this exchange, Li explains that "Manon projects her own experiences onto Sarah, assuming that since Gaudet is the greatest impediment to her independence, his death must also signal new freedom and happiness for her servant" (248). Manon cannot see herself as part of Sarah's oppression and enslavement. She assumes Sarah would happily serve her white mistress, until she comes to understand Sarah's probable goal: "It was her hope that they would kill me" (Martin 117). Relationships between masters and slaves, mistresses and slaves, and masters and concubines are always "defined by coercion and bondage" (Li 253). This realization leads to Manon's obsessive mission to find Sarah.

This neurotic pursuit to find Sarah solidifies Manon's transformation from oppressed woman to "ruthless master" as she mirrors previously examined patriarchal figures. Dr. Flint vows to never stop searching for Harriet Jacobs, SchoolTeacher travels all the way to Ohio in pursuit of Sethe and her children, and Drayle chains Lizzie to the front porch in order to keep his claim to her. As she prepares to be in control of the plantation, she is reminded of how her father would have handled her present situation. "My father would never keep a runaway, but he never let one stay away either" (Martin 128). Now that Manon has assumed the position of the man, she must think and act like a man also. There are multiple reasons to not seek Sarah. Rose has proven to be a remarkable replacement servant in her ability to be housekeeper, and now that Manon is relocating to her mother's home, she will no longer need as many servants. Manon is

also annoyed by the fact that hiring Mr. Leggett, a slave hunter, is a financial burden, regardless of whether or not Sarah is returned. Lastly, Mr. Roget has offered Manon two thousand dollars should Sarah return, which is far more than her worth. However, Manon, like Dr. Flint, declines any offers to sell her precious property in an angry pronouncement: “I am going to considerable expense to recover what is mine, by right and by law, and recover her I will” (Martin 171). Despite all it will cost Manon to hunt for Sarah, she is determined to have her back because she relies upon and shapes herself through her relationship with Sarah.

Throughout the text, Sarah has shaped her own identity. Though her efforts failed at times due to her position as slave, she attempted to do that which suited her own needs. She sought out her own love interests and shared true love with Bam. She birthed children she loved and grieved. She rid herself of her oppressors through physical violence or escape. She saw the world with an awareness that Manon could not. Manon spent her life struggling for the power of her husband while Sarah spent her life seeking her own desires. Sarah is eventually captured and returned to Manon by Mr. Leggett, after passing as an elderly man while aboard a ship to Philadelphia, like the real-life escape of ex-slaves William and Ellen Craft (Li 252). Upon her return, Manon tells her aunt that Sarah “has tasted a freedom you and I will never know” because “She has traveled about the country as a free white man” (Martin 189). As Li explains, “Manon’s observation of Sarah is deeply influenced by her own desire (253). Manon’s desire is to experience what she perceives as freedom through the experience of the white man. However, Manon’s attraction to Sarah is not Sarah’s ability to travel as a free white man, but it is her audacity to travel as a free individual driven by her own agency. Throughout

the text, Sarah is the only individual who exercises a freedom based on her own desires. Manon's father failed Manon's mother as a husband and as a man, and Manon's mother was forever victimized by the shortcomings of her husband. Mr. Gaudet's finances were in shambles, and he worked tirelessly to keep up social appearances in front of other gentlemen, and Manon was trapped in a sham of a marriage. She was disgusted by her husband, yet she longed for all she perceived he had in his relationship with Sarah and in his relationship with power as a white man. The only understanding of freedom and power that Manon can have is in association with white patriarchy. However, Sarah transcends the assigned gender roles of the time.

Sarah is aware of her own desires and seeks to fulfill them. Unlike Manon, Sarah does not seek to overthrow an existing power structure. Instead, she longs to possess herself. In order to do this, Sarah utilizes all resources. She enlists Manon to make requests to Mr. Gaudet on her behalf, she uses her body, and she uses Delphine, Ms. Gaudet's cook, to help her make her escape. Finally, she uses white patriarchy to make her escape by being disguised as a white man. These instances prove Sarah to be one who understands the world in which she lives, but also as one who seeks to not be anyone other than herself. She seeks neither the position of Mr. Gaudet nor the position of Manon. From the opening scene of the novel, Sarah makes it clear she wants no part of the world in which the Gaudet's participate. When Manon watches her husband play his gruesome "game" with the slave boys in the water in order to prove his racial supremacy and sexual dominance, Sarah refuses to look. Even when encouraged by Manon to look, Sarah responds, "no, missus...I don't like that glass" (Martin 18). As Li notes, this refusal by Sarah is a bold rejection of "both the master's vision and his tools" (246). This

rejection by Sarah contrasts Manon's deep desire to not only adopt but embody the master and his tools throughout the text.

Sarah's self-awareness and resistance is all the more proven as Manon obsessively chases after her. The ending of Martin's text is reminiscent of Jacobs's narrative. The cliché happy ending is not present. Jacobs does not end her days with her biological children in a home in the north as she had hoped, and Sarah does not end her days living in the North as a free woman with her baby. Instead, she is returned to Manon where she will most likely spend the rest of her life. However, upon her return, Manon speaks for the first time of the night Sarah escaped. In the exchange, Sarah explains that life would be different for her if Sarah hadn't gotten to the horse first that night. She dreamed often of the incident:

I was running, running, and the horse was there, if I could only get to it, but someone was holding me back. Sometimes it was my husband, sometimes Sarah, sometimes a man I didn't know. Once I turned to find Mother clawing at me, her teeth bared like a wild animal. (Martin 191)

While someone was holding Manon back, Sarah was doing and seeing all that Manon wished she could do, but she did not possess the ability to find her own strength because her focus was only on replacing the power structures that existed. Manon's contentment with life as she knew it was solidified as she imagines how life was for Sarah in the North. While she could watch her husband's horrific behavior with the boys in the opening scenes of the text, she could not stomach the image of Sarah being treated as a woman. Sarah explains to Manon:

When you gets to the North,” she said, “they invites you to the dining room, and they asks you to sit at the table. Then they offers you a cup of tea, and they asks, ‘Does you want cream and sugar?’” (Martin 192)

Manon imagines Sarah sitting there as a woman and is astounded:

I considered this image of Sarah. She was dressed in borrowed clothes, sitting stiffly at a bare wooden table while a colorless Yankee woman, her thin hair pulled into a tight bun, served her tea in a china cup. The righteous husband fetched a cushion to make their guest more comfortable. It struck me as perfectly ridiculous. (Martin 193)

The mere thought of Sarah being treated like a lady repulses the woman who is able to watch the sexual abuse and exploitation of boys by her husband. The two scenes differ greatly in that the group of boys is being helplessly oppressed while the image of Sarah is the product of her resistance to oppression. As Li notes, “though she envies Sarah for having experienced the freedoms of a white man, Manon concludes by endorsing the dictates of white male power” (254). The power struggle between Manon and Sarah exists and continues because of Sarah’s resistance. Her self-identity is neither tied to Manon nor white patriarchy. In the final lines of the text, Sarah reiterates her independence as she tells Manon her treatment in the North “appeal to me” (Martin 192). This statement solidifies Sarah as an individual who has never and never will be fully known by Manon. Although Sarah’s interior life has not been shared in *Property* as it is by the protagonists in the works of Jacobs, Morrison, and Perkins-Valdez, one exists and it is filled with demands and desires that will not cease so long as Sarah, resistant mother and woman, lives.

CONCLUSION

“Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are free.” (Jacobs 200). Like Jacobs, the maternal figures in the texts of Morrison, Perkins-Valdez, and Martin conclude their stories with a freedom that eludes the “usual way.”

The women have endured unimaginable hardships, and their troubles are not to be assumed to be resolved in the final pages of the texts, but their constructions as multi-dimensional women and mothers are advanced from where they began. While each woman may be poorly misunderstood, as Barbara Christian states, she is undeniably present and active in her role as mother (Hansen 64-65). It is her intentionality in this role as mother that causes her to fulfill her maternal role with reckless abandonment. Morrison describes her own maternal role as something significant in and of itself and liberating: “There was something so valuable about what happened when one became a mother. For me it was the most liberating thing that ever happened to me. 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 ever asked me to do” (O’Reilly). Such a view supports a reading of the maternal role as something significant as a new maternal self emerges from the existing solely female self. It is what the maternal figure does with this new self that depicts her complexity and ferocity in her new role.

The women discussed in this project were all under the umbrella of slavery, but their experiences with slavery, patriarchy, family, and community were all so very different. Anything that might seem “usual” regarding the life of a slave woman was quickly revealed as flawed. It became obvious that humanity, and much more

specifically, motherhood, cannot be confined to a one-fits-all definition. Mothers ebb, flow, and bend, oh, they bend, but they do so with a love that can never be broken.

It is their intentionality as mothers that enables these characters to endure social seclusion and exclusion at many times in their lives. As Baby Suggs explains to Sethe in *Beloved*, “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to the rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (6). Yes, that grief fills every crack and crevice of a home and is ever-present, but Baby Suggs, Sethe, Jacobs, Lizzie, and Sarah, and countless other maternal figures carry that grief, whether it be in the form of love, physical pain, or loss, and they refuse to submit to socially and racially constructed boundaries at the detriment of their maternal roles.

Although the texts covered in this dissertation expose the atrocities of slavery and the personal impacts the disgusting institution had on individuals, they also expose a new narrative for African American maternal figures who are powerfully present in their roles as mothers. There is no singular image of the ideal mother, except that she risks all social acceptance in order to achieve what she perceives to be in fulfillment of her maternal role. Evaluating the impact and result of oppression on African American women’s gender and identity as mothers works to reveal the way in which motherhood erupted as a form of empowerment, resistance, and self-realization.

The bodies of these women may have been enslaved, but their wills were never subdued. A look behind the veil at the lives of each of the women in these texts proves that these women were not only forces to be reckoned with, but they were trailblazers for maternity. The limits to which they would go in order to “mother” their children were infinite. Not only did they resist the existing white patriarchy that worked effortlessly to

dehumanize, demoralize, and desensitize them, they also resisted every accepted social constraint in the name of motherhood. Understanding their insistence to claiming and maintaining their maternal roles made them not only resistant to existing oppression but also revolutionary in forging a new identity that was shaped by their individual circumstances. To see them as simply being reactive to their position as slave is to miss their radical determination to do what they deem best for their children and families.

Life behind the veil is every bit as disturbing and heart-shattering as one might imagine; however, lifting the veil exposes a powerful, determined, resistant woman: a mother.

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