

## **The roots of the body in Toni Morrison: A Mater of "Ancient Properties" - woman author**

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"No matter what you did," muses the unhappy Jadine in *Tar Baby*, "the diaspora mothers with pumping breasts would impugn your character" (288). The "diaspora mothers" are everywhere. They are the night women who visit Jadine in a dream, the imaginary women in the trees, the African woman in the Parisian bakery, and Therese on the Isle de Chevaliers. They remind Jadine, who is prey to their seduction, of that which she has chosen to forget: her African-American roots. The "diaspora mothers" are everywhere in Toni Morrison's other novels as well. Like Jadine, Morrison's texts - in particular, *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* - are drawn to and repulsed by the haunting presence of the mother. At the center of these works is a literal or figurative maternal presence that dominates each one of the characters; she is the symbolic hub about which their individual stories revolve. From the "pumping breasts" issues a very curious kind of milk - narrative itself.

This incessant literary return to the mother, I argue, is both an expression of a psychological desire to recover the repressed - the lost object of desire - and

an expression of a political desire to recover the past. Laura Mulvey has claimed that the "lost memory of the mother's body is similar to other metaphors of a buried past or a lost history that contribute to the rhetoric of oppressed people" (167). Morrison's novels demonstrate the political potential of the mother's body. By charting a discourse of maternal desire, Morrison challenges her readers - in particular, her African-American readers, to whom, in her words, she writes - to reinvestigate their sense of self, and their relation to that which has been lost (see "Rootedness" 340).

"Tell us about ships turned away from shorelines at Easter, placenta in a field ...."

*Sula* opens with the distorted and phantasmagoric body of Shadrack, an unfortunate war veteran. After a horrific battle experience, Shadrack lies in a hospital bed, watching his hands "grow in higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack's beanstalk all over the tray and the bed" (9). His body grows out of bounds, as does his sense of self. He cannot connect his face with an identity: "... he didn't even know who he was or what he was .... he was sure of one thing only: the unchecked monstrosity of his hands" (12).

Morrison introduces bodies that are similarly disoriented - shellshocked, drowned, burned, or mutilated - in almost all of her works. Her novels break down proper body boundaries, thrusting the

characters into a primordial chaos in which the experience of identity founders. Reading one of Morrison's novels is like entering the warm, sensuous, and overpowering ambience of a womb. Over and over again, we have characters who regress, in psychoanalytic terms, to the undifferentiated sense of self characteristic of an infant.

Margaret Mahler's seminal work *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant* describes the process of separation-individuation requisite "for the development and maintenance of the 'sense of identity'" (11). The infant learns to view the mother's face as other, and himself or herself as a distinct self. Critical to this process of separation is the experience of body boundaries. Since the infant's earliest perceptions are bodily sensations, it follows that the ego is "first and foremost a 'body ego'" (220). Therefore, the first step toward ego development for the infant involves bodily differentiation from the mother (65).

Morrison's works track a reversal of this process; each orchestrates a return to the "symbiotic origin of the human condition" (Mahler 227). Whether we look at Shadrack retreating from society to live in his womb-like hut over the river, Son in *Tar Baby* allowing himself to be swallowed in Caribbean womb-water, Joe crawling back into his mother's "cave" in *Jazz*, or Sethe and Paul regressing to a

bewildered and helpless infantile state in *Beloved*, we find that the womb exercises an eerie and ineluctable power over Morrison's heroes and heroines.

Despite the uneasiness of these uterine encounters, Morrison makes clear throughout her corpus that the traumatic loss of boundaries, the return to the maternal, is necessary in order to restore "authentic" identity. All of Morrison's novels begin with individuals who have an unsatisfactory relation to themselves and others. They lack a true sense of centeredness - a core self - and they are drawn to the body of the (m)other in order to restore the integrity of their own. Boundaries must be blurred before they can be remade. In *Beloved*, for example, the violent fragmentation of the sense of self experienced by the characters is a process which initiates their rebirth. Sethe, Paul D., and Denver re-enter the womb, succumbing to *Beloved's* embraces, only to emerge "baptized" with a clearer sense of who they are.

It would be a mistake, however, to read Morrison's works merely as original meditations on a classic psychoanalytic model of the self. The narcissistic wound that repeatedly impels Morrison's characters to return to the mother should be seen in its political and cultural context. In an essay on Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Barbara Johnson shows how the main character, Helga, is driven throughout her adult life

in a way similar to Morrison's characters - to seek parental figures to mirror and validate her. Johnson begins her analysis by showing how this search has its origins in what Kohut has termed an inadequate mirroring by the mother. Johnson concludes her argument, however, by pointing to the way in which the novel ultimately shows the limitations of the Kohutian model. For Kohut, the narcissistic wound is the mother's fault. He ignores the political and cultural factors which might lead the mother herself to be de-valued, and thus render her "incapable of sustaining the role of self-object" which the child needs to form his or her self (Johnson 193). Johnson urges us to remember that the narcissistic injury might result from factors outside the nuclear family. In other words, it is not, as Kohut would have it, just the fault of the mother. That this desire to return to the mirror stage may be a common theme in African-American writing may have something to do with the "narcissistic injury resulting from the insertion of a black child into a hostile white environment" (Johnson 195).

Morrison's characters' incessant return to the mother to repair the self should be understood as a political project to repair the black mother - to restore her dignity and value in the "hostile white environment" in which she would have no value. The confrontation with maternal desire and the consequent re-making of body/self boundaries is a political enterprise, as well as a psychological

experience. Moreover, while the basis for desire is, for Morrison, the instinctual attraction for the maternal, it is also, at the same time as will be explained below - a yearning, in a philosophical sense, for the body per se (sensuous experience) and, in a political sense, embodiedness (a sense of past). Morrison's characters grope with desire in all three senses: The body is the matrix for psychological, philosophical, and political self-placement.

#### Centers and Places: An Embodied Past

Houston A. Baker, Jr., has drawn attention to the poetics of place in African-American women's writing in *Workings of the Spirit*. Morrison's works, as he points out, are about people in their places: the neighborhood, the women in their respective homes, the men shifting between homes and women. But Morrison's works are also about spiritual places: finding the center of the self. In *Sula*, for example, all of the characters are engaged, to varying extents, in placing themselves. The alternative is to be like Chicken Little, whose body drifts homeless in the river for three days because the bargeman does not believe a black body to be worth "placing" properly.

Political reasons motivate the quest for the center - this search for right boundaries and a distinctly demarcated place. The black people's town, the Bottom, has been physically displaced because of racist politics, just as war has overturned Shadrack's

sense of self. The town was literally "uprooted," torn from the land. The novel begins with the portentous description of the now bottomless Bottom: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City golf course, there was once a neighborhood" (3). Rootlessness is the result of racist oppression.

The body becomes a place - if not the place - to root oneself. Shadrack is typical of Morrison's inwardly and (seemingly) outwardly unbound characters; he wants and needs something definitive, something to "order and focus experience" (12), something which would "make a place" for fear, for his dizzy sense of placelessness. He initially finds it by staring at the reflection of his black face in the water, a sort of reversed drowning: "But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more" (13). Water gives birth to his body, rather than, as is the case with Chicken Little, submerging it.

The body's meaning as a site of history - the only possible site of history for blacks in diaspora - is strikingly apparent in *Beloved*. Not only has Sethe erased the memory of her painful murder of her daughter, but she has repressed her own longing for her murdered mother. The only trace Sethe has of her awful maternal past is her body: the tree-scar on her back. The novel concerns the return to this scar

as the site of history. *Beloved* begins with a scene in which Paul D. traces this scar with his hands. This historic mapping is what inspires the trajectory of the novel's movement from dead flesh that has forgotten to sensual (maternal) flesh that remembers. The "scar," history, becomes a living part of the present.

In *Jazz*, Morrison explicates what it means to be rooted in the body and in history. Here the body - in its curious manifestations as the City, jazz, and the character Dorcas(1) - has "tracks." It roots Morrison's characters while also inspiring their movement - just as a track does. When Joe throws himself into his affair with Dorcas, he has been claimed by the melody of jazz and by the design of the City:

. . . he is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record. Round and round about the town. That's the way the City spins you .... You can't get off the track a City lays for you. (120)

The City, like a jazz piece, provides its inhabitants with a rhythm and melody. "All you have to do is heed the design - the way it's laid out for you..." (9).

Dorcas is the human expression of the body in the novel. It is she who is most in harmony with the sensuous whisperings of the City and jazz. She

thinks "of that life-below-the sash as all the life there [i]s" (60), and has a "hunger" which is fed and exacerbated by "a City seeping music that begged and challenged each and every day" (67). The other characters - Joe, Violet, Aunt Alice are drawn to her because of the appeal of her carnality. Even her corpse brings out the urge to be touched: Violet, the jilted wife, contemplates reaching down and cutting her hair.

Tellingly, Dorcas, the desired body of the novel, also has "tracks" - the acne on her face. Joe does not want her face to clear. "'Take my little hoof marks away? Leave me with no tracks at all?'" (130). He insists on acne because the tracks of the body (of the City, of jazz) root him. He himself is trackless: He is Joe Trace, whose parents left without one.

This discourse of tracks circles back to and converges with the discourse of the mother. For ultimately what are tracks - the jazz record, the acne on Dorcas's face, the City streets - if not the tracks that lead to the mother? The desire to which jazz and the City speak is clearly one and the same as the infantile desire for the other. What is remarkable about almost all of Morrison's characters in *Jazz* (or in her entire corpus, for that matter) is that they lack either one or both parents. Throughout the novel, we learn that, for each character, this loss is what has had the most impact on his or her psyche. Each, like Golden Gray, seeks "this gone-away hand that

never helped me over the stile, or guided me past the dragons, pulled me up from the ditch into which I stumbled" (158-59). While the parent is sometimes (albeit rarely) the father, the omnipresent discourse of the maternal - from figurations of wombs to amniotic "sea-water" - works to delineate the male parent as a puppet presence. The "life hunger," as Denver puts it in *Beloved*, is, in essence, for the mother.

It follows that the desired "body," the body which tracks, is synonymous with the maternal body. When Joe goes to find Wild in her cave, he, listening to "the music the world makes" - a sort of jazz tune made by "some combination of running water and wind in high trees" - follows the song until he sees "tracks enough to know she was there" (17677). The mother's body, history, and desire elide into one signifying complex.

A "track" is a "record" - a memory, something that roots one in the past, as well as directs one to the future. It permits the evolution of history. It is only when Joe is stabilized in the groove that he can improvise and feel that he is free. Jazz is alive to change: It is not "an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack" (220). Similarly, the maternal body - in its manifestations as Dorcas, jazz, and the City - is a "core" in two senses of the word: It is that which gives stability, provides a past, and it is that, like the proverbial apple, which provokes

movement - spurring us, like Adam and Eve, into a history of our own making.

### The Mother's Seduction

At the heart of Morrison's novels is the supposition that the self does not change without Eros. Identity formation involves a return to the body in all its significance: the place of birth, the object of oppression, and the seat of desire. Sethe in *Beloved*, Jadine in *Tar Baby*, and Joe in *Jazz* are remarkably similar in that they learn more about their past - their symbolic or real mothers and their roots in black history - only when they embrace their own eroticism. The return to mothers and history is an erotic experience.

In a Morrison novel, there is typically one character who serves as a catalyst to the other characters to remember their sexuality, and inspires the narrative movement from repression to experience of desire. Morrison's eroticized characters, driven after years of repression/oppression to assert their own deepest wants, are stimulated to redefine their sense of boundaries and their relation to themselves, others, and white culture. In *Sula*, for example, the eponymous heroine forces the Bottom's inhabitants to confront the issue of the desire, and their place in the community. Not only does Sula sleep with all the husbands - violating boundaries - but she frightens people with her extraordinary body, with

its dark and ever-darkening rose birthmark. Sula, the errant erotic force who breaks up people's marriages and destroys friendships, reminds the people of the Bottom of their own lack of bottom.

In *Beloved*, it is the eponymous character who acts as the catalyst to remember desire. For Sethe, the body, scarred and brutalized by slavery, has been something to repress. *Beloved* overwhelms her with the historic and erotic charge of her body. Significantly, it is only after *Beloved* manifests herself that Sethe engages in her first erotic relation in years. *Beloved*, in effect, provokes the erotic unfolding of Sethe's past, the sensual re-telling of her scar. Her own relationship with Sethe is from the first moment erotic, reaching its climax in her murderous embrace in the clearing.

In a conversation with Robert Stepto, Morrison, speaking of a slave's narrative, asks: "Who is she, you know? Who is she? It's just incredible. And all that will surface, it will surface, and my huge joy is thinking that I am in some way part of that . . ." (229). What is interesting is that the past is made to surface through the erotic arousal of the body, as if coming in contact with a lost history is the same process as remembering the experience of the senses. Remembering is the proper word here: In every single one of Morrison's erotic episodes, the character seems surprised by his or her sensual excitement, and, in fact, the charge seems to consist

in remembering that such an experience of the body does exist, that eroticism is possible. The contemporary feeling of desire evokes buried memories of other desires. Sensuality surges forth as an awakening, an experience that jostles the memory: It brings the characters to their "senses" - a sense of their deepest "core" selves and their places in history.(2)

As Sethe's body re-awakens erotically, she remembers her past with her husband and her children, which is, in effect, the story that *Beloved* sets out to tell. Eros, by definition a state of want, propels the narrative forward in search of its object, creating while it seeks that which is inaccessible to it. Morrison's elision of erotic memory with historic memory expresses a provocative interpretation of what it means to desire a past: inclusion in a dynamics of narrative as an agent - a desiring subject - and not as a passive object of discourse.

In *Jazz*, it is Dorcas who inspires the awakening of erotic desire, and the remembering of past histories. The novel consists, after all, of layers of stories aroused by the erotic presence of Dorcas. Desire for the body jostles each character to remember his or her past - and past selves. Joe had thought he had settled into his fifth and permanent self before he met Dorcas, but then to his surprise he falls in love and remembers a way of experiencing life that he thought had been buried within him. He is drawn to

Dorcas because with her he feels "a randy aggressiveness," a "ping of desire" that "he had not used or needed . . . before" (29). Violet is similarly inspired by Dorcas to remember desire. She barely has a body herself, and is always drinking malts to puff up her ever-receding rear end. But when Dorcas threatens her bodiless marriage, she suddenly remembers that she was once an "embodied" self. There are two Violets, she recalls; one who cannot gain her hips, for whom ". . . everything is over but the talking" (110), and the other, the full-bodied Violet of her youth - "the powerfully strong young woman who could handle mules, bale hay and chop wood as good as any man" (105). "Maybe that Violet," as she puts it, "the one who knew where the butcher knife was and was strong enough to use it [on Dorcas], had the hips she had lost" (94). In other words, maybe that stronger Violet of her youth has come back, inspired by Joe's own movement toward Dorcas's body.

Even the narrator of *Jazz* is jolted by the body. A disembodied voice herself (himself) she cannot help being drawn to the bodies of the other - her characters. She admits she needs their bodies: "What, I wonder, what would I be without a few brilliant spots of blood to ponder?" (219). Our narrator, like her characters, undergoes a revolution in self-understanding when confronted with the body. By the conclusion of the novel, she has

questioned her own disembodiment, her inability to find the "core" of her life:

I am uneasy now. Feeling a bit false. . . . I ought to get out of this place. Avoid the window; leave the hole I cut through the door to get in lives instead of having one of my own. (219-20)

She too now wants to return to the maternal womb: "I want to be in a place already made for me, both snug and wide open" (221). This description of the womb is remarkably similar to Joe's understanding of the track: that which both is "snug" - which roots - and is open to change.

In *Tar Baby*, the catalyst to remembering the body and one's place in history is Son, the mysterious stranger who sneaks like a thief into a wealthy Caribbean mansion, and lives for weeks hiding in closets, nibbling on leftovers. He is "starving," and it is this hunger that speaks to all the characters in the household, and especially to Jadine, the black woman who has denied her African roots in favor of the white values to which her patron - Valerian, the mansion's owner - introduced her. Jadine has so willingly embraced white culture that she has become, literally, its cover model. She has chosen to represent the body rather than to experience it. Son's arrival dramatically startles her, just as Sula's sexual presence startles the Bottom community and *Beloved's* incarnation startles Sethe. His

overwhelmingly carnal presence awakens Jadine's hunger, and makes her readdress her relation to the body.

Jade is conflicted about how she is to relate to this hunger. "He had jangled something in her that was so repulsive, so awful, and he had managed to make her feel that the thing that repelled her was not in him, but in her" (123). She has lived her life, like Aunt Alice in *Jazz*, afraid of the "fast crack on the head if you let the hunger show" (124). When Son overwhelms her with his bodily presence, she would like to repress desire, just as she had wanted to repress it when, in a Parisian grocery store, an African woman dressed in yellow inspired her to feel the same deep and uncomfortable longing.

#### The Politics of the Apple

Jade, the "yalla," as Gideon calls her, realizes her "hunger," her body only through contact with very black-skinned people. Reembodiment, it seems, is a black phenomenon. Morrison throughout her works valorizes the black body as having a natural and essential connection with the powerful force of desire. She divides her characters into those who can feel the body and those who cannot, and the breakdown tends to correspond to whether the character is white or black - and then how black. In *Tar Baby*, for example, Morrison emphasizes that Valerian and Margaret, the only white characters,

have not touched each other for years, in contrast to their domestic black servants, Sydney and Ondine, who are physically intimate with each other. The white body is inherently fleshless, a point brought home in *Beloved*, where the slave-hunter, the epitome of white evil, is called "the man without skin."(3)

Desire, in Morrison's works, is cast as a birthright of the African-American people; realizing it is to realize one's roots in the African-American community. Jade fears desire, just as she fears being cast as a representative of her race and joining its "fraternity." She rejects the "ancient properties" of African people that Son, the African woman, and the night women who visit her in a dream embody. It is telling that Jade relates well to Margaret, the white woman whose relationship to the body is so askew that she mistakes her own flesh and blood, her child Michael, for a pin cushion and enjoys sticking sharp objects into his plasticky behind. Margaret hates her son's "prodigious appetite" (236) - that which she does not have.

Can Jadine be entirely faulted for fearing the erotic, as defined in Morrison's novels? To relate to one's roots, to one's desire is a dangerous enterprise. After all, desire is a biblical sin, that which led to human death. Morrison solidly aligns the sense of hunger in her novels with the archetypical biblical transgression. In *Jazz*, Dorcas is, for Joe, "the

reason Adam ate the apple and its core" (133). Joe would do anything for Dorcas, just to be able "to bite down hard, chew up the core and have the taste of red apple skin to carry around for the rest of [his] life" (134). Morrison makes much of the apple's dangerous power to break down boundaries, re-order the universe. After eating the apple, Adam and Eve are radically re-aligned in relationship to each other and to God. Similarly, after Joe pursues his desire for Dorcas, his relationship with Violet and with the others in his community is (temporarily) threatened. "Biting into the apple" also leads him to murder Dorcas.

The motif of the Edenic apple is present in *Tar Baby* as well. Here Therese and Gideon are punished for their transgression in the garden. Their boss - the ridiculous white "God" of candy, Valerian - fires them when he catches them in the garden stealing his apples. He responds to their "sin," their desire by re-asserting the Law: A black person has no right to want. Morrison clearly shows her own authorial judgment of the Law of the white Father. Valerian's act, it is implied, is an expression of anality: ". . . he had defecated on two people who had dared to want . . ." (204).

Daring to want - that is the explosive power that sets all of Morrison's novels in motion. The plot of each work is propelled by the movement of the body away from cleanliness, whiteness, and pristine

order. A new "purity" is sought, a purity of the soul that rejects the purity defined by whites. Whites define "purity" not as Son does, as an authentic relation to one's community (202-04), but rather as that which results after one has excluded the other: White industrial civilization, as Son explains, is based on producing and eliminating "waste," creating wasteful products and disposing of them. As Son puts it, Americans spend their lives "washing away the stench of the cesspools" - a Valerian-type attempt at moral rectitude - "as though pure soap had anything to do with purity" (203). Their sense of good, Tar Baby makes clear, is based in egotistical industriousness.

The Americans Son refers to are specifically white and middle-class: They are those who "despise the [black] culture that lived in cloth houses and shit on the ground far away from where they ate" (204). Desire overturns this hierarchical relation between white and black, and in so doing radicalizes the meaning of the fall.(4)

"That woman's woman - that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty"

It is not to be forgotten - and none of Morrison's characters do forget - that desire, the biblical sin, is, for Morrison, a maternal property.(5) The choice between black or white values - embodiedness or bodilessness - is a choice between accepting or

rejecting the realm of the mother, between obeying or denying the "call to the flesh" enunciated by her body. As Baby Suggs, a grande mere herself, tells us: "Here . . . in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard" (Beloved 88). It is the task of all of Morrison's characters to come to terms with this maternal summons.

Take Jadine, for example. She, with her "tiny brass knob breasts," is reminded of her ancient properties by "the diaspora mothers" (288), black women who are fertile. The African woman in yellow carries three eggs; she balances them all effortlessly, as if to boast of her own easy acceptance of maternity. Therese, the maternal figure on the island, is associated with her "'magic breasts'" (289) which are still able, despite Therese's age, to give milk. It is she who figuratively gives birth to Son at the end of the novel, taking him to the womb-like waters of the sea, from which he will emerge a new man, in touch with his black roots.(6) Son, unlike Jadine, embraces the realm of the mother.

Morrison's novels are as ambivalent as Jadine about the terrible and wonderful properties of the mother. The mother is an omnipotent presence, a founder of communities, and a destructive bearer of death. It is precisely the ambivalence about the recovery of the repressed (the lost mother's body, the ancient properties of African culture, the horrors of Afro-

American history) that makes these novels so interesting. On the one hand, some characters are reborn through contact with the maternal - like Joe and Violet, Sethe and Paul D. On the other hand, there are plenty of unhappy endings. There are those who are subsumed by the mother, never to return. Fusing and merging with the mother, one risks self-annihilation: "The proverbial return to the womb," as Jessica Benjamin puts it, "is a return to the tomb" (50).

I would offer two alternative, yet not conflicting, ways to read this ambivalence. On the one hand, Morrison's repeated accounts of suffocating or castrating mothers can be understood psychoanalytically, as repetitions of a familiar psychoanalytic drama in which the mother threatens the existence of the self. On the other hand, I would argue that this psychoanalytical situation in Morrison's works is itself a political metaphor: Going back to the maternal, understood as the roots of black culture, is hardly an easy enterprise. To regain "authentic" black identity, to reorient the political sphere, one risks self-annihilation, just as Adam and Eve, in rebelling against God's injunction, are cast from the Garden. Given the atrocities in Afro-American history, to return to one's "roots" has the psychic resonance of returning to a subjugated position: Although the mother's body, the site of history, is made to signify anew - the

record, as Joe says in *Jazz*, does not repeat at the crack - it is also the trace of an unbearable past.

The ambivalence about maternal power and the uneasiness about what radical Afro-American politics entails explain the reason that, in many of Morrison's novels, those characters who signify the mother and evoke the desire for her meet with a depressing end. After the boundaries of the community and the self have been upset and reorganized, the characters who have inspired this revolution are exorcised: Pecola, Sula, Beloved, and Dorcas are all banished in some way or other (death, disgrace, rejection) from their communities.

What is this, if not mother-killing? The renovation of the self and the African-American community involves a deadly sacrifice, a matricide. Dorcas, Sula, Beloved, and Pecola are sacrificial lambs that permit the community to restore itself. Morrison's novels are ritual tales of catharsis and renewal; they are a religious experience of reincarnating the mother Goddess, only to banish her. Interestingly, this primal killing, unlike the Freudian original sin of patricide, leaves no guilt. One is reborn from maternal severance.

But can you really get rid of the mother? After successfully getting rid of mother figures, the text never does manage to get rid of desire for the mother. In *Jazz*, after the text is cleaned of all

mothers - the death of Dorcas is but the final sacrifice - the very last lines dramatically position the reader in the same role as the mother in the cave, as the absent parent, as the "body" we have learned to desire. ". . . look, look," says the narrator. "Look where your hands are. Now" (229). The reader is bodily drawn into the text; she or he is to give the hand that Joe's mother did not. It is the reader's task to engage in the book, to remake the book in her interpretation - in other words, to be a mother. The maternal body - always repressed, always denied - always returns. Is there any text that more creatively manifests the resistance, as Jane Gallop has put it, "to the loss of the comforting belief in the omnipotent Mother who guards and can ensure the daughter's life"? (115). But again, what happens in Morrison's novels is more than psychological resistance. As I have argued throughout this essay, the repressed mother signifies two things: the lost object of desire and one's roots in African-American history. The mother's refusal to be buried in Morrison's texts can be read as a resistance to historic erasure. The stain is ineradicable.

Trinh T. Minh-ha makes an interesting connection between mothers and history in her essay "Grandma's Story." She notes that the "world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand" (121). She adds that, in Africa, phrases like I sucked it at my mother's

breast are typical expressions of the process of learning history. What seems to be true for Minh-ha is that which Western philosophy has always denied: It is the mother's body which bears culture and history. Toni Morrison, in evoking the bond between women and word, can be seen as part of a long tradition of maternal griots.(7)

#### Notes

1. The City is a body of images, light, sound, and breath, a sensuous army of fragments which conspire to "pump desire" (Jazz 34). Jazz, like the City, is a phenomenon of the body. As Dorcas's Aunt Alice puts it, jazz has an appetite, a "longing for the bash, the slit; a kind of careless hunger" (59). Morrison highlights the power of jazz by interjecting jazz chords in the novel's most intense moments. The climatic scene of the novel, Dorcas's murder, spins forth as if along the grooves of a record. The excitement of the party, the sensual rhythm of wit and young bodies, "the beat that pumps the heart" (191) is a jazz performance, only to be interrupted when Joe shoots Dorcas. Then, as Dorcas observes, "'The record playing is over'" (193).

2. Morrison's literary language aims for the same effect; in its emphasis on sensual detail, it makes the reader remember the senses. Moreover, Morrison's highly metaphysical sensual discourse calls

attention to itself as a poetic code to be cracked - one does not end with the senses, but begins from them to engage in intellectual questioning. As Morrison commented in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, the "force," the "felicity" of language "is in its reach toward the ineffable." This view of language is strikingly similar to the function of the erotic in her novels.

3. Morrison's racialization of black and white bodies should be seen in its literary-historical context, as coming from a longstanding tradition in African and Afro-American letters. The Negritude movement in the 1930s-40s can be said to have predated Morrison in establishing an alliance between black bodies and nature, and white bodies and culture. Leaders of the movement, such as Leopold Senghor, Aime Cesaire, and Leon Damas, maintained that the African has a mystical and sensual sympathy with nature and the universe; in Senghor's view, "eye-reason" was typical of the "white technician," while the African black farmer had "feeling-reason." This construction of race was considered an extraordinary revolutionary move, both because of its grounding of a black political poetics and its critique of industrial culture.

Many Afro-American Civil Rights leaders and intellectuals took inspiration from Negritude's "anti-racist racism," as Sartre called it, in the 1960s. Stephen Henderson, for example, drew attention to

the tradition of "soul" in Afro-American culture, and showed how it was the American counterpart of Negritude: Both, in his view, emphasized intuition, the dance, the power of the word, wholeness, and harmony as intrinsic to black identity. The valorization of a black "soul" went hand-in-hand with a rejection of white, middle-class values.

4. Morrison's use of biblical metaphors of the "fall" - as seen in Therese and Gideon's transgression, Joe's apple-eating, Sethe and Beloved's "falling" in the clearing, and Pecola's "fall" into disgrace evokes a familiar tradition of articulating African-American protest in Christian paradigms. As Albert Raboteau explains in his seminal work *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, slave protests in the nineteenth century were often expressed in a Christian identification with Moses. Similarly, leaders of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement characteristically organized their incendiary speeches around radical reinterpretations of biblical experiences.

Many African-American novels, as Chester Hedgepeth, Jr., points out, have also staked their politics in a reinterpretation of biblical themes: In novels by John A. Williams, Charles Chesnutt, Richard Wright, William Melvin Kelley, and James Baldwin, for example, the Afro-American plight is metaphorically equated with that of Samson; the suffering of these authors' protagonists is shown to

be the logical consequence of political rebellion, as is the case in the Samson story. What Morrison does in her particular use of Christian paradigms is to align Afro-American protest with a biblical experience of sin. The "fallen race," to use Césaire's term, subverts the meaning of its fall by showing the white God to be evil.

5. See Erickson 304 for a discussion of Morrison's valorization of the maternal. Erickson also sees that Morrison "stands behind" the valorization of the maternal expressed by her characters.

6. The beginning of the novel establishes Son's intimate relation to the maternal. He jumps ship, looking for salvation, and ends up taking refuge on the Isle des Chevaliers - "pushed" as if by "the hand of an insistent woman" (4). Morrison's description of this scene is heavily laden with maternal imagery, foreshadowing the fact that it will be a mother figure - Therese - who will provide the means for the salvation of "Son" at the novel's conclusion.

7. Morrison's emphasis on the maternal has resonance in the works of many other black women writers and intellectuals. If an African-American feminist poetics could be defined - a project at the heart of several recent feminist African-American anthologies - one salient characteristic would be the valorization of the black mother as a means to preserve and make history. See, for example, bell

hooks's essay on the political significance of the African-American domestic homeplace, Barbara Christian's essay on the significance of literary expressions of mothering and sexuality for African-American feminism, and Joanne Braxton's discussion of the outraged mother figure in Afro-American writing in *The Woman That I Am: The Literary Culture of Contemporary Women of Color*, ed. D. Soyina Madison (New York: St. Martin's P, 1993); Marianne Hirsch's commentary on the centrality of the mother in modern black women's writing in her essay, "Maternal Narratives: 'Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood,'" *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990); and Temma Kaplan's assertion that mothers, as the site of oral history, uphold the black community in her introduction to *The Barnard Occasional Papers on Women's Issues Summer 1988: 2-3*. Alice Walker's renowned statement could serve as a manifesto for many contemporary African-American feminists: "In search of my mother's garden, I found my own."

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