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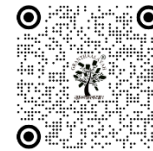
ECHOES OF THE FRACTURED WOMB: TRAUMATIC MOTHERHOOD AND SOVEREIGN RESISTANCE IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON AND ALICE WALKER

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ABSTRACT

The maternal dilemmas in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy* and Alice Walker's *Meridian* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* do not emerge from an eternal struggle between motherhood and freedom. And they begin in those institutions that require Black women to give care, while also refusing them custody, bodily security and the power to define what protection means. This essay traces four sharply different historical contexts as if they were not multiple versions of one wound. What else has the woodshed scene in common with Florens's mother's bargain, *Meridian* Hill's slavery of her child and Tashi's surrender to genital cutting, is that each one happens under a different kind of pressure. What keeps them connected is the rupture at the juncture of responsibility and acknowledged power. The breach, which the story refers to as a ruptured womb. Reading milk, scars, letters, domestic thresholds, political malady and interrupted testimony closely demonstrate that resistances is not the same as sovereign command. And Morrison and Walker are most disingenuous when a character appears to gain the ability to choose finality. Their multiple politics, in a more durable way, are in deferred account, collective listening and care partial outside of biological ownership. The emergent model of maternal authority here is relational: it is compromised by history, answerable to others, and able to contest ownership without claiming that injury has led to a pure freedom.

Keywords: Black Motherhood, Trauma, Toni Morrison, Reproductive Authority, Alice Walker, Relational Sovereignty

INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM IS NOT MATERNAL FEELING

A strange motif comes up in talks about hard mothers. In this way the goddess that has hemmed women in fades nicely from view, leaving her reaction lit up and open for assessment. Morrison and Walker do not accept this easy refuge of visibility and blame. Yet their mothers and daughters inhabit the place where slavery, colonial trading, church respectability, movement politics, medicine and nationalism ruptures decisions about our most intimate lives. The figure of the captive body in Hortense Spillers's account is instructive here, which demonstrates that slavery did not just damage an untroubled family structure but reorganized both the names and the relations through which families can be recognized at all [Spillers \(1987\)](#). The economic necessity of Black women's reproductive labor is pronounced by Hartman's stress that such practices must be simultaneous with the legal realization of maternal claim [Hartman \(2016\)](#). As a result, the womb in these novels is neither a personal symbol or an abbreviation of femininity. It is a location where the public power intersects with the private reality.

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The term fractured womb designates a breakage between corporeal reproduction, maternal labor, custody and social acknowledgment. It does not identify a wounded feminine archetype. It is this distinction that makes a difference in a corpus wherein women are consistently branded as excessive, unnatural, irresponsible or betraying their culture by others. Intersectional analysis helps to make it clear that such descriptions are made at the intersection of race, gender, class and institutional authority – and not by piling one form of disadvantage on top of another [Crenshaw \(1991\)](#). Patricia Hill Collins also regards Black feminist thought as a situated mode of critical achievement rather than an automatic privilege just by identity [Collins \(1986\)](#), [Collins \(1989\)](#). That summary applies to both novelists in their caution concerning the conflation of experience with automatic authority. Experience — What their women know that institutions don't know, but suffering does not metamorphose into a self-justifying act. This is the trick Morrison and Walker Pulls: They leave judgment in place, but redefine territory on which any judgment must take place.

Trauma theory can shed light on deferred memory and repetition, but becomes blunt when all loss is equalized. LaCapra's distinction between topological (or historically specific) loss and generalized absence preserves the difference among enslavement, a child's relinquishment, political exhaustion, and ritual cutting [LaCapra \(1999\)](#). Hartman's caution against the "violence of the archive" becomes no less relevant either, since quite a few influential maternal testimonies are absent, postponed or only live in a daughter's memory that tests [retelling \(2008\)](#). This is effectively a restrained close reading — which you can tell by the length of this piece! It tracks objects and gestures—milk, a scratched letter on plaster, college uniforms, a scar on the face—and along the way refuses to diagnose fictional subjects with safe clinical distance [Morrison \(2004\)](#), [Morrison \(2009\)](#), [Walker \(1992\)](#), [Walker \(2003\)](#). While Ruddick makes a compelling case for maternal thinking as practical judgment, these novels challenge us to see that preservation ultimately cannot be judged without also judging the power that determines whose children will be saved and whose care will matter [Ruddick \(1980\)](#).

BELOVED: PROTECTION AFTER THE LAW HAS FAILED

There is milk, before the woodshed. Sethe recalls the attack at Sweet Home by what schoolteacher's nephews took from her while she was still lactating. That corporeal detail is precise, irrefutable and unequivocally unabstractive. Even so, her body is only understood as being available labor and yet the milk already belongs to children sent ahead. Morrison fabricates npn-maternity data in advance of moral debate. Wyatt theorizes the maternal symbolic that accounts for bodily substance that obtains meanings beyond those possible with talk while Spillers shows where to find the scene in slavery's transmutation of body into re-usable flesh (Spillers 1987 Wyatt, perhaps here). Sethe's escape is not an ostensible search for freedom. Wants to go reach for the feeding baby When read with later criticism that her love erases the line of demarcation between mother and child, they can pinpoint a real threat but only half the play. This boundary is already transgressed within a property system that asserts ownership over both bodies [Demetrakopoulos \(1992\)](#), [Schapiro \(1991\)](#).

The future is truncated by the arrival of Schoolteacher in Ohio. She observes no legal recourse nor a slow path to protection; she sees Sweet Home come back for her children. The murder which follows interrupts the master's ownership but also takes terrible control of the future of that child. Morrison intentionally leaves that contradiction open without answering. While Mbembe's account of necropolitics names a world in which the right to expose certain populations to death organizes everyday rule, the concept cannot transform Sethe's act into an unambiguous emancipation [Mbembe \(2003\)](#). Bell's characterization of Beloved being a womanist neo-slave narrative demonstrates this utility because the novel's form as a multivocal call to evidence prevents any one language from rendering its own legal/accounting case definitively closed, whether that be a legal(literal)-, maternal-, communal- or psychoanalytical-vocabulary [Bell \(1992\)](#). Sethe is compelled beyond the limits of what could be tolerated — and she acts. The novel does two things at once in keeping responsibility and historical coercion in the same frame, something that moral simplification cannot possibly do.

The return of Beloved exposes what was left incomplete in the act that matters most. The explanation that Sethe struggles to give the daughter returned seems but an endless service. The food goes, work stops, and the house shrinks in as a mother and daughter cannot find an end to payback. Replace decorative circularity in the novel with Page's demonstration of how repetition shapes form and Krumholz and Rody descriptions of pathways opening up from [haunting \(1992\)](#) and rememory [Rody \(1995\)](#) through which repressed history enters into the present. Koolish's analysis of shame also elucidates why Sethe is unable to remember and move on—her remembered self has turned into an object of accusation [Koolish \(2001\)](#). What was a previous seizure of agency now flips to compulsion by the demand of the dead child. Maternal power, closeted in the pair, measures no love evanescence of life.

The women arrive not with a verdict already reached. Some were annoyed by Sethe's pride, some did not give her a warning when the riders arrived. What they collectively sound like matters — because it is imperfect community, not moral purity, that interrupts the enclosure. That Sale's account is about call-and-response and that Rushdy emphasizes daughters as history tells us why recovery lies not in Sethe's final confession [Rushdy \(1992\)](#), [Sale \(1992\)](#) but in voices entering into relation. When Paul D later insists that Sethe herself is her best thing, he doesn't mean a therapeutic slogan. And it cautiously disentangles her humanity from the very children she was coerced into demonstrating it through. Sharpe's concept of wake work is on point: care is less about mastering the aftermath of slavery than tending to what it continues to do [Sharpe \(2016\)](#).

THE MERCY THAT FLORENS CANNOT HEAR

A Mercy takes us back to a colonial past in which emergent racial categories are being solidified by commerce, disease, religion and land possession. The episode in which Florens's mother begs Jacob Vaark to take the girl has precisely this martian view with respect to maternal violence and, for all the right reasons: the daughter experiences it as being chosen against. However, Morgenstern's interpretation retains the ethical seriousness implicit in an act whose loving intent can not be straightforwardly transferred [Morgenstern \(2014\)](#). It is not until later in the novel that the mother reveals her fears about the Portuguese owner and her wish that Vaark might be just the slightly less savage pretender. A brief explanation does not extend to Florens. Protection and abandonment occupy the same gesture here since sale is perhaps the only grammar for attempted rescue. As Montgomery also demonstrates with the work on migration and exile here, this failed message must be understood in a novel that is completely occupied by forced movement, while Basu outlines how even racial formation in the colonial body politic organizes itself through forms of contagion [Basu \(2021\)](#), [Montgomery \(2011\)](#).

In Vaark's untimely, un-inhabited, property-potent home, however—empty of people—there is a strong impulse for Florens to create her history on those walls intended for permanent life. It is not a silenced voice whose smooth recovery this is. Her phrases respond to the Blacksmith, echo the urgency to chase him and are literally unreadable to the person they are geared toward. When the master's monument survives his design long enough to receive another, the house is unwittingly turned into an archive. This is where Hartman's own non-archive of imports touches down: Florens leaves the record, only to have transmission fail [Hartman \(2008\)](#). Morrison refuses to have the reader facilitate the reparation of this mother-daughter relationship. We know more than Florens knows, but that knowledge is an uncomfortable bonus. This type of idea is what has organized her identity since a sentence she never heard—her mother would rather have had anyone else—and the fact she did hear: take the girl.

This so-called mercy is therefore narrow, dangerous, and tarnished. Jacob might be better than the slaveholder next to whom mother stands, but his estate thrives through profits connected to Caribbean slavery. Rebekka situates her own household for a moment between possible affiliations among the displaced, then closes over it in something less homelike than racial hierarchy, like constriction after illness and losing loved ones. No act of private charity remains outside the economy that produced it. So the comparison with *Sethe* must end before equivalence. *Sethe* prevents the recapture of a child by killing her; Florens's mother sends a child into another household for the sake of saving herself. What joins them is not a universal motherly sacrifice, it is the reversal of protection to an act legible to the child as betrayal. The maternal authority in both novels is broken at the nexus of communication. An answer that history has rendered impossible would fulfil the demand for relational repair.

MERIDIAN AND THE REFUSAL OF THE ASSIGNED LIFE

Instead, there is an entirely different type of coercion at work here: one that moves Meridian Hill to give up her son. No one owns the child as chattel, but church, family and college respectability render motherhood the no less dubious evidence of womanhood. Walker doesn't write meridian's early motherhood with any sentimental epiphany. She becomes trapped, shunned; the cultural promise that a motherly instinct will kick in serves only to alienate her more. While Tucker focuses on the novel's placement of this conflict against American myths of the road, Pifer reads Meridian's erratic movement toward voice as "the vital material of political formation" [Pifer \(1992\)](#), [Tucker \(1991\)](#). Her giving up renders the argument that biological motherhood should deplete a woman's potential contribution to public life baseless. But the kid doesn't just disappear into a theoretical discussion of choice. The loss is there, awkwardly present, refusing conviction or celebration, and Walker bails.

Meridian is given another language of devotion, and yet another institution that is willing to devour her—the civil rights movement. The image of her entering towns, marching, doing voter-registration work and braving danger over and over behind the harness of responsibilities that men who could move more easily can jettison. It is Stein's reading that detects the critique of revolutionary absolutism in the novel, whereas Hendrickson focuses on its remembered movement between democratic potential and actual achievement [Hendrickson \(1999\)](#), [Stein \(1986\)](#). But Meridian's recurring sickness makes that distance corporeal. Collapse is not a kind of private weakness or secret mark of purity. [Duck \(2008\)](#) usefully frames her account of melancholia as a form of social grief that is constellated in unremitting but politically active, rather than extra-political, symptoms. She has the stamina for what the movement requires, but its lexicon of sacrifice can echo painfully like the maternal asking she fled: Am I loved to extent to be used up?

Her non-declaration that she can kill for the revolution places a boundary without disengaging from struggle. Meridian is still working with communities but she won't turn death into a certificate of devotion. It is the most compelling reworking of sovereignty in the novel. Political authority is not power to command life but the ability to select forms of accountability, even to exercise the right to refuse certain identities that perform exhaustion as virtue. Truman takes Meridian's cap and starts to walk at the end, while she quits the moral position Truman had assigned her. Care has been divided again among people who previously used Meridian, but all those people are over the age of 70. No longer confined to the relationship between mother and child, no longer invested and left — potentially forever — in the body of one good woman. Walker does not say that this redistribution repairs Meridian, but it unbinds the relationship between female virtue and conscripted sacrifice.

TASHI'S SCAR AND THE ARGUMENT OVER CULTURE

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* bodily harm is a call to conform to cultural norms. Tashi is mutilated partly because of a colonizing presence that has rendered the Olinkan identity beleaguered, his body scrawled with marks demanding bottom evidence to the theory that a community still thrives in this world. Buckman describes that body as a colonized site and Cogeanu, the competing inscriptions placed upon it [Buckman \(1995\)](#), [Cogeanu \(2011\)](#). Such readings demonstrate why the novel is not simply a conflict between African tradition and Western freedom. This operation is procured by local patriarchal authority, sustained via women's labor, and processed through colonial and medical vocabularies that harbor their own hunger for domination. Almost everyone uses Tashi's agony as proof. Fidelity to the nation, Western observers will read as backwardness; trauma, therapists will read; and watch how swiftly wisdom turns into possession.

In its transnational framing, representation becomes part of the harm done in Walker. George contends that the Africa of the novel is both a product of globalization and constrained by fiction's own parochial power, while Gourdine reads its womanist endeavor via a purposefully unstable ethnographic blueprint [George \(2001\)](#), [Gourdine \(1996\)](#). The Black Atlantic approach Fabi developed is particularly pertinent, since sexual violence travels over the histories of slavery and empire, instead remaining caged in a national custom [Fabi \(1999\)](#). Tashi is erased in the course of being moved (back and forth) through Olinka, Europe, and the United States: there is no destination where the wound becomes easy. You, therapy supplies Tashi with language but cannot supply one innocent. Marriage provides company but not a perfect body. To put it in a single sentence, national belonging buys you recognition at the price of silence. The novel's impatient form—moving sets of speakers, memories, testimonies—keeps these inadequate frames in relationship with one another.

The killing of M'Lissa and her execution by Tashi can appear to be the restoration of ultimate control. Walker imparts to the conflict a ritual scale while Moore's account of archetypal symbolism indicates why that move is necessary, though the political force in the ending comes from its refusal to allow individual revenge to be adequate [Moore \(2000\)](#). M'Lissa is the harm and a woman who has been shaped to reproduce that practice, killing her breaches only a wall without bringing it down. The more serious resistance offered by Tashi is that which her trial and death have rendered possible in public discourse. Testimony shifts a private injury into communal listening and the final banner lays bare the secrecy that sustains this practice. The authority to kill is always the most extreme and yet least adequate exercise of sovereignty—as in *Beloved*. If Speech extends beyond the one who spoke it, that export of clarity may never have been so categorical, and yet quarrel attracts relations which the solitary utterance cannot ever command.

MATERNAL AUTHORITY WITHOUT OWNERSHIP

When stacked together, the four novels reveal an institutional sleight of hand: women must be responsible for maintaining life while the means of preservation are determined elsewhere. Your date is enslaving Sethe's children; colonial exchange ends up dictating the options left to Florens's mother, family and mobilization culture bolt Meridian together through sacrifice; nationalist patriarchy codes Tashi's body with collective authenticity. It makes it possible to name the endurance of arrangements that conjoin racial hierarchy and land, labor, and premature vulnerability without equating every subsequent institution with slavery [McKittrick \(2013\)](#). This comparison is only fair if there are still audible differences based on how long ago the history had taken place up until October 2023. In both cases the common thread is that responsibility differs from authority. All of the women must atone for a life they are only partially allowed to control.

The novels also question the ideal that to fix this fracture in oneself, freedom hands full control of the psyche over to a single person. Tashi's revenge and Sojourner Truth are wishful written, the articulated desire to be an action that cannot later be papered over by others; or for any other reason do so as well. Every act is presented with a remainder: the return of a daughter, the failure of a message, the endurance of a social practice. [Collins \(1986\)](#) outsider-within formulation explains why knowing expands through a problematic intimacy with community, rather than through ideals of pure inclusion or heroic separation. Related Books These books give voice to communities that remain entangled in the wounds they observe. Neighboring is withdrawn, households are racialized, organizations are weaponized and women police the body. Nonetheless, the outcome that solitary authority continually delivers is the more destructive one. It will turn care into possession or testimony without an audience. In contrast, an intentionally restricted term for the alternative is relational sovereignty—the right to disturb ownership, designate embodied knowledge, and channel care while also answering to those impacted by an action.

This politics takes a more convincing form as narrative than declaration. *Beloved* traverses the woodshed in a flow of consciousness from several individuals; *A Mercy* postpones the mother's storytelling until it becomes unreachable for her daughter; *Meridian* displaces political temporality through illness and memory; *Possessing the Secret of Joy* diffuses Tashi's history amidst rival testifiers. There is no such thing as the complete story or its moral significance, and therefore no one speaker who can speak for that whole account. Rody, Rushdy and Sale have illuminated how rememory, daughterly signification and call-and-response destabilise a singular historical voice in *Beloved* [Rody \(1995\)](#), [Rushdy \(1992\)](#), [Sale \(1992\)](#). Walker has a variation on the same operation of polyphony, but one with a distinct but analogous affect: testimony becomes credible by way of friction between partial views. A reader must pass judgement but can not be in the purely clean condition of a court unscathed by the history behind it.

CONCLUSION

That the broken womb is not an icon of lost femininity. It then identifies a political breach between the requirement for a woman to care and her power over the conditions of care as not being acknowledged. Morrison and Walker, through acts so easy to condemn when displaced from the history they displace, make it visible; and then you can restore that history almost by force finding these acts so hard to absolve. These figures that exercise the agency of transformative love—Sethe, Florens's mother; Meridian; Tashi—do not lay out a path of heroic exemplars for others to follow. They make other institutions visible by acting where strong choices have already disappeared.

What is left over from those moves is the real matter of the novels a haunting that requires companions, an inscription inscribed on walls, political labor offloaded from one drained woman to another, and evidence that transforms secrecy into public crusade. Such are the humble forms of power alongside the sovereign theatre of life and death determination. They are also more resilient, because they can be corrected, responded to, and remembered. Finally, the novels move maternal resistance from mastery to relation. Care is politicized not by purity, but by the ability of those who have been subjected to its asymmetrical costs to speak and be responded to while also being able change the terms under which responsibility has been arbitrarily allocated.

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