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"Motherlove was a killer:" Examining Patterns of Violence between Mothers and Children in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *A Mercy*

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Dedicated to the matriarch which made me—Lindsey, Mom, Mina, Grandma Gracie, and KK—and inspires me always to imagine grace.

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ABSTRACT

"Motherlove was a killer:" Examining Patterns of Violence between Mothers and Children in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *A Mercy*

by

Laurel Phillips

In her novels *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *A Mercy*, author Toni Morrison invites her audience to consider acts of violence in mother-child relationships as they exist beside and live among expressions of love. Through close readings of these three novels, I identify a pattern of violence between mothers and their children, tracing this pattern as it manifests across generations in the lives of those children and beyond. While each novel attends to its own unique set of questions at a specific moment in US history, each features maternal violence in a way that necessarily probes at our moral intuitions about the justifications of violence, particularly those acts of violence which seem inextricably tied to expressions of love between mothers and their children. In this way, Morrison prompts her audience to question a system of morality which promotes violence as a tool for white oppression, while simultaneously reexamining acts of maternal violence by black women. Through

characteristic narrative and stylistic choices, Morrison encourages us to suspend our automatic moral judgements about these women, inviting us instead to understand their violent actions in the context of the violent systems which oppress them and of which they are a product, and even to empathize with them.

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Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, that caring – again. Having to stay alive just that much longer. O Lord, she thought, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer.

- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987).

I. Introduction

In her novels *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison explores the relationships between mothers and their children through matriarchal worlds in which acts of violence exist beside and live among those of love. These largely female driven stories feature moments of violence across generations between mothers and their children. Morrison's work famously asks challenging questions which push us to see our history through new eyes and to examine more seriously our most fundamental convictions. The impact of her work and the pervasive presence of violence performed by mother characters onto their children prompts our consideration of how maternal violence seems to fit so universally into some of Morrison's most well-renowned stories. Why include these acts of maternal violence? How do these violent moments contribute to the larger themes Morrison seeks to investigate in her writing? To answer these questions, I turned to several of Morrison's novels which feature maternal violence and mother-child relationships predominantly, with the intention of understanding what coherent purpose is served by this trope in *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *A Mercy*.

In each novel, I identify a pattern of violence between these mothers and their children or grandchildren, tracing these acts of violence as they manifest in the lives of those children and beyond. In *Beloved*, Sethe murders her eldest daughter just after they escape the oppressions of chattel slavery in the early days of Emancipation. In *Sula*, Eva burns her son Plum alive, himself a veteran of the first World War. Finally, in *A Mercy*,

Florens' own mother trades her away to a stranger seemingly in preference for her infant son during the nascent years of colonial America. Each of these acts of violence triggers a reproduction of violence later on in the novel at the hands of these mothers' children. The ghost of Sethe's murdered child comes back to their home at 124, imposing harm back onto Sethe. Eva's murder of her son and emotional detachment from her daughter prompt acts of emotional violence in Hannah, in turn causing harm between Hannah and her daughter Sula, whose acts of violence reach beyond their family unit into the larger community. Finally, Florens carries the wound of her mother's rejection with her until ultimately committing her own acts of physical violence against a free blacksmith and his young ward. In this way, these acts of maternal violence seem to ignite a pattern of violence between mothers and their children which is mirrored and reproduced by future generations.

Morrison employs this pattern of violence in each novel as a means of responding to and challenging the traditional standard of white Western morality which has governed "ethical law" in the United Sates for most of its history, by poking holes in its hypocrisy and presenting ways of existing outside of it. To do so, Morrison centers the choices of women whose actions seem to operate outside of morality altogether, at least that of the corrupt communities they find themselves subject to. Thus, Morrison challenges her audience to question the system of morality imposed upon these characters, to question its legitimacy, sincerity, and the equity of its application. Though this ethical mission drives all three novels, the pattern of violence in each novel looks different, and so reflects the unique set of ideas Morrison seeks to explore and reject within them.

Through various narrative and stylistic choices, Morrison invites her reader to suspend judgement and to empathize with the violent actions of her mothers and children, thereby pushing us to understand their choices outside of these normative white moral frameworks. For each book, I spend time looking closely at how Morrison describes these moments of violence, particularly how she imposes textual gaps and makes narrative choices which force a distance between her reader, the violent actor, and the action itself. In doing so, Morrison prompts us to suspend our judgements about these women, to find empathy and understanding for them before levying judgements upon them. Importantly, Morrison does not advocate for more violence; instead, she challenges her audience to practice a kind of temporary amorality. And in this suspension of moralizing judgement, we can ask questions such as: can an act of violence also be an act of love? How are patterns of violence shaped by a person's past experiences of physical and emotional violence, and by larger systems of racial and gendered oppression? What are the responsibilities of motherhood and who gets to decide? In these questions and Morrison's mother characters, there is remarkable power and understanding given to these fictional women characters, whose stories represent those of real black women in US history who found ways to love their children and assert maternal responsibility in spite of the oppressive systems designed to deprive them of the ability to do both.

Ultimately, I argue that while this pattern of violence serves no singular purpose across these three of Morrison's novels, the persistent inclusion of these violent acts raises universal and pervasive questions about maternal ethics in what has always been a largely immoral place, i.e., the United States. In *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *A Mercy*, Morrison positions these acts of violence outside of white morality, weighing these mothers'

choices in light of their oppressive experiences as black women and inviting her audience instead to empathize with them.

II. Patterns of Violence in *Beloved:* "She threw them all away but you" (Morrison, *Beloved* 74).

Morrison's fifth novel *Beloved* (1987) follows protagonist Sethe's escape from slavery in Kentucky to her free life in Ohio. Set at the cusp of African American emancipation in the late 1800s, the story primarily features one household: Sethe, her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, Sethe's daughter Denver, and the ghost of Sethe's dead daughter whom I will refer to as "Beloved." During Sethe's time enslaved at Sweet Home plantation, her escape, and eventually life with her daughter and mother-in-law in Ohio, Morrison uses these three women and the spirit of Sethe's lost daughter, Beloved, to explore the cyclical nature of trauma in those who have been institutionally impacted by slavery and racial oppression. As scholar Stephanie Demetrakopoulos writes, "In *Beloved*, Morrison examines motherhood in its most denied form, the mother enslaved" (Demetrakopoulos 52). With the institution of slavery as a backdrop, this story prompts consideration of what motherhood looks like for both the incarcerated and for the free, and in this way, directly addresses a specific moment in US History. How is Sethe's role as a mother shaped by the cruel realities of slavery and of being a black woman in this United States at this time? What does motherhood look like for Sethe as she tends to her own trauma post-enslavement, while trying to care for her children and create a better life for them? How do we understand Sethe's violence toward her children in light of her experiences of both enslavement and freedom? All of these questions sit in the

background of *Beloved,* and give important context to the pattern of mother-violence which appears in the novel. In this way, the violence which Sethe enacts upon Beloved and Denver represents a reproduction of the emotional and physical violence done unto her by her own mother. Likewise, Beloved's later harm to herself and her mother appears to be a manifestation of the violence done unto her by Sethe. In this way, Morrison weaves this pattern of violence into the very framework of *Beloved*.

In the novel's pivotal moment of violence between mother and child, Sethe chooses to take the life of her oldest daughter rather than allow her to be stolen back into a life of slavery. Having finally escaped Sweet Home and arrived at the safety of Baby Suggs' home in Ohio, Sethe is horrified to see Schoolteacher and his nephews rapidly approaching her mother-in-law's home, ready to strip her and her children of their narrowly grasped freedom. Morrison describes the scene he walks in on:

> She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere – in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at – the old n* boy, still mewing, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arc of its mother's swing. (Morrison, *Beloved* 175)

Though Sethe succeeds only in killing her oldest daughter, she seems to have attempted some mortally destructive act on all her children. Unquestionably, Sethe means to take the life of her child; it is no accident and no else's doing. Both the attempted and actualized violence against her children reflects Sethe's desire to prevent her children from the dehumanizing oppression she herself faced at Sweet Home. Thus, Sethe's act of

murder reflects her desire to protect her children from a life of violence, both physical and emotional, one which she experienced in her life as a slave.

Though we are given few details about Sethe's mother, the few details which slip through Sethe's memory give us a window into the cyclical repetition of violence present in their relationship as an expression of love and protection. From the beginning, Sethe and Ma'am's relationship is defined by separation, one which is itself fueled by the violent realities of slavery looming in the background of all memories between Sethe and her mother. Early on in Beloved's stay at 124, she prompts Sethe to recall what she can about her own mother, whom she knew as "Ma'am." Sethe reflects on what she has been told of her mother: "She must of nursed me two or three weeks – that's the way the others did. Then she went back in the rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was" (Morrison, *Beloved* 73). Thus, from the very beginning Ma'am was denied this essential expression of motherlove, i.e., that of feeding one's child. This description of Ma'am's inability to nurse her own daughter also invokes the reoccurring representation of Sethe's motherhood through the act of breastfeeding. Throughout the novel, the act of breastfeeding becomes unequivocally tied with Sethe's motherhood. However, both women, in one way or another, are robbed of this traditional expression of motherlove; Sethe in the assault she endures at the hands of schoolteacher's nephews (20), and Ma'am because of the grueling fieldwork forced onto her which separates her from her daughter (73).

Sethe and Ma'am's relationship is similarly defined by physical violence, the emotional violence done to Sethe because of this separation, as we will see, bears fruit in her relationship with her own daughters later on. In this same recollection, Sethe

describes the time in her early childhood when Ma'am revealed the branding on her rib, intending that if she were ever lynched, which she ultimately is, Sethe might be able to identify her by the scar (73). In this way, Ma'am's identity literally becomes tied to the violent branding in Sethe's eyes. Understanding the significance of the moment but not its mortal undertones, Sethe likewise worries about her own mother's ability to recognize her, and so asks her to "mark me too," in response to which Ma'am slaps her (73). As scholar Amanda Putnam puts it, "In one of the few positive memories Sethe has with her mother, violence marks the moment that focuses on possession and recognition, encrypting Sethe with the understanding that maternal violence is easily also an act of love" (Putnam 40). While the emotional violence of separation is momentarily addressed, the love and care between Sethe and her mother in this moment is also characterized by these expressions of physical violence. Through the branding and the slap, as well as the imposed separation on the rice plantation, Sethe's relationship with her mother is defined by expressions of physical as well as emotional violence. In this way, Sethe's relationship with her biological mother becomes literally tied to expressions of violence.

These violent expressions come to a climax in the choice shared by Sethe and Ma'am of whether to allow her child to live. Nan, the woman primarily responsible for raising Sethe, provides this essential information on Ma'am's past:

> She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. 'She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from the whites she threw away. Without names she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man.

> She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. (Morrison, *Beloved* 74)

We learn here that after enduring sexual assault at the hands of white slave traffickers, Ma'am has herself made the choice not to keep those children, presumably by killing them or allowing them to die. To "throw away" those children which were the product of rape, while not precisely identical to Sethe's murder of her children, establishes a clear connection between the women's decisions. Then, in an act representative of her own autonomy in choosing a sexual partner, Ma'am names her daughter after her father. Aside from this passage, Morrison does not refer to Ma'am's infanticide again, so this moment easily falls away from our awareness. But this piece of her history is essential to positioning Sethe within a lineage of women who made the difficult decision to take the lives of their children.

However, the violence Sethe experiences is not limited to that received directly or indirectly from her mother, but also that which she experiences at the hands of white masters while a slave at Sweet Home Plantation. Perhaps the most poignant image of this violence and suffering is encapsulated by the "tree" growing on Sethe's back— "I got a tree on my back"—scars left over from Schoolteacher's whippings after she confronts him about the nephews taking her milk (Morrison, *Beloved* 18). Schoolteachers' treatment of Sethe manifests in both physical and emotional violence, in his physical abuse of Sethe through beatings, as well as the dehumanizing practice of studying her traits as if she were an animal (Morrison, *Beloved* 228). Other examples include the

Garners[1] who, though painted as the sympathetic and kind white masters, ultimately still view the Sweet Home men and Sethe as property, their kindnesses never extending to granting their slaves freedom, even after the death of Mr. Garner (44). Though Schoolteacher's actions are cruel, his nephews' act of stealing Sethe's milk (sexually assaulting her) constitutes perhaps the most emotionally charged while also physical enactment of violence done unto Sethe, so she tells Paul D: "After you left those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it" (Morrison, *Beloved* 20). Like Schoolteacher's abuse and harassment of Sethe, this act is further motivated by and reflective of a refusal to see Sethe as a full human being worthy of dignity and autonomy. All these moments of violence—both physical and emotional—make up the only life Sethe has ever known: an enslaved one. In this way, the violence Sethe experiences as a slave, as well as that of her mother, necessarily inform the way she understands acts of power, care, and choice, all of which ultimately manifests in her decision to take the life of her first-born daughter. And still, the repercussions of Sethe's violent act do not end with herself.

When Beloved returns to 124 and finally reunites with her mother, she begins to enact violence upon Sethe and herself. Shortly after Paul D. leaves 124, Morrison describes in a Faulknerian chorus weaving Sethe, Beloved, and Denver's voices together, the feelings of grief and abandonment shared by Beloved and Sethe:

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[1] When we consider how young Sethe is when she comes to Sweet Home as a teenager and her lack of other mother-figures, it does not seem like a stretch to say that Mrs. Garner represents a possible maternal figure whose presence in Sethe's life is poisoned by racist ideologies and institutions. As Demetrakopoulos writes, "Mrs. Garner seems motherly with Sethe, but she still treats her as a slave" (56). We will revisit this concept of mother-substitutes later on in my discussion of *A Mercy*. But the important thing to note here i that Mrs. Garner's maternal kindness is overshadowed by her treatment of Sethe first and foremost as property.

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

After this moment, Beloved and Sethe become consumed by this mutually obsessive toxic relationship, as Beloved behaves in emotionally violent ways characteristic of a child with internalized feelings of abandonment. As Putnam writes, "Maternal abandonment, either literal or emotional, is one common manifestation of these lessons in Morrison's texts, often resulting in child-driven violence" (Putnam 26). Thus, Beloved's internalized feelings of abandonment seem to manifest in violent actions of her own. The violence Beloved levies onto Sethe takes many forms; from her seemingly endless appetite for sweets to her domination of Sethe's time and attention, Beloved grows with consumption of 124 as Sethe physically shrinks (Morrison, *Beloved* 295). We can imagine Beloved's stomach growing in a way that literally resembles pregnancy; in this way, while her actions are directly and physically harmful to herself, they would also invoke the separate traumatic experience of pregnancy which Sethe experienced while enslaved at Sweet Home. Beloved's punishment of Sethe is at times physically violent, as well as emotionally violent:

> Beloved sat around, ate, went from bed to bed. Sometimes, she screamed ‘Rain! Rain!’ and clawed her throat until rubies of blood opened there, made brighter by her midnight skin. Then Sethe shouted, ‘No!’ and knocked over chairs to get to her and wipe the jewels away. (Morrison 294)

Beloved punishes Sethe by reenacting the violence of her initial infanticide, a child violence which mirrors mother violence. She also seems to be presenting her mother with the chance to stop Beloved from hurting, even killing herself, thereby recreating Sethe’s decision to save or end her daughter’s life. Denver interprets her mother’s act as one of abandonment, perhaps even of no longer loving her, and so reacts in ways both physically and emotionally violent in order to punish Sethe.

This act, Beloved’s clawing at her throat corresponds directly to the method by which Sethe took her life, a way of punishing Sethe by recreating the very moment of Sethe’s murder. Denver observes Sethe’s guilt and frustration with Beloved:

> Yet she knew Sethe’s greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning—that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant—what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on... This and much more Denver heard her say from her corner chair, trying to persuade Beloved, the one and only person she felt she had to convince, that what she had done was right because it came from true love. (Morrison, *Beloved* 295-296)

This is the most graphic description of Beloved's murder Morrison gives. It also means that the moment where Stamp Paid interrupts Sethe as she swings Beloved at the walls of the shack is not really the act which ended Beloved's life; it was in fact the calculated slitting of her baby's throat. With this additional information, we can put the scene together more clearly: that Beloved's throat had already been cut when Sethe tried to make certain that her baby's life would not continue by desperately striking her body against the walls of the butcher's shack. Thus, when Beloved scratches at her throat and draws blood, she seeks to punish Sethe by recreating that initial moment of violence, reminding her that she will never be forgiven by the one person she seeks forgiveness from. This scene also demonstrates the endless explaining Sethe tries to deliver to Beloved who seems to have no desire to hear it. To remind Sethe not only of the act of violence she committed against her, but of that fact Beloved has not forgiven her. In addition to the trauma of that moment, Beloved forces Sethe to open the wound of the worst thing she has ever done and that she will never atone, can never be forgiven by her daughter. In this way, Beloved enacts emotional violence upon Sethe by performing physical violence upon herself. This constitutes an act of vengeance on Beloved's part, as she seeks to harm Sethe, both emotionally and physically, as a means of making her feel the way she felt when Sethe took her life.

In this way, we can trace this pattern of violence from mothers to their children in *Beloved* from Ma'am's infanticide, to Sethe's murder of her daughter, and finally, to Beloved's emotional violence back to Sethe's physical violence unto herself. Through them, Morrison demonstrates the way violence begets violence, even when that violence was intended as an act of mercy.

III. Discussion of Violence in *Beloved*: "Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love" (Morrison, *Beloved* 190).

Beginning again with the central act of maternal violence in this novel, Morrison's narrative and stylistic choices impose a distance between the audience and the act of violence performed. As we examine this passage again, note that Morrison describes the scene not from Sethe's point of view or from Denver's, but from that of a third-party narrator. It is from this perspective that we peer inside the shed which has already been covered with blood, in which some violence has already taken place away from the reader's eyes:

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

The baby in her arms is presumably little Denver only a few days old. Howard and Buglar on the ground watch their mother hurl their infant sister, presumably Beloved, at the wall. Though she "misses" and is intercepted by Stamp Paid, Sethe's swing results in the ending of Beloved's life. Instead of providing Sethe's perspective or experience of the situation, this outsider perspective creates distance between us, the audience, and the act

itself. In doing so, Morrison seems to isolate this moment, freezing it in time. By momentarily disconnecting the act, “what there was to stare at,” from Sethe’s thoughts or feelings, Morrison allows it to exist almost independently, preventing the reader from knowing exactly why Sethe chooses to do this and so keeping us from evaluating her decision at all. We simply watch and take in the haunting power of the moment. By leaving out the answer to this most burning question, “why,” Morrison creates a suspense which enables us to read this moment without judgement. Furthermore, this resistance to immediately addressing Sethe’s intention presents us with the opportunity to transform curiosity into genuine empathy, to wonder for ourselves why a mother who has just fought so hard to free her children from slavery, would want to take the life of her children. We see and feel the enormous tragedy of Sethe’s choice, the powerful paradox of life and death which she exercises over her children, and for a brief moment, we understand her, precisely because we are not explicitly told why Sethe makes this choice. In this way, Morrison imposes textual gaps to create space between Sethe’s actions and the reader, challenging us to momentarily suspend moral judgements.

Through this narrative distance and this act of violence which doubles as an act of love, Morrison invites us instead to empathize with Sethe’s violent actions, and to question the systems of morality, which this society, and our own, attempts to hold her to. Later in conversation with Paul D., Sethe reveals her reasons for taking her daughter’s life: “I couldn’t let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn’t let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out” (Morrison, *Beloved* 192). Here Sethe explains that by killing her daughter, and with the intention of killing her other children and herself, she hoped to spare them from a life of future enslavement under Schoolteacher.

By illuminating Sethe's reason for killing her daughter after the act itself and positioning it as the lesser of two evils, Morrison rejects a traditional ethical framework, within which infanticide represents one of the most egregious violations. As Morgenstern argues:

> Morrison's mothers, then, might be said to invent ethics, or to bring an ethical realm into being because, through performance, they must constitute the right to mother as an absolute responsibility... This precarious maternal gesture about which Morrison seems to have no illusions, resists, even as it must constitute, the psychic violence of slavery. (Morgenstern 23).

Sethe's act of killing her daughter "invents" a new kind of ethics which prioritizes a mother's ability to care for her child over the hypocritical social and political systems of morality that might immediately scorn and criminalize her act of violence. As Demetrakopoulos puts it, "It is better, Sethe's act argues, to die in the cradle than to live out one's full life span soul-dead, a zombie / puppet daily treading the process requirements of someone else's life and needs" (Demetrakopoulos 53). It is important to think about how these systems of morality invalidate Sethe's motherhood and incarcerate her for this violent act, while simultaneously bolstering the institution of slavery which does not so much as bat an eye at the violence done to enslaved men, women, and children whose lives literally do not belong to themselves. Rather than indicating a disregard for human life, Sethe's choice reflects her desire to protect the quality of her children's lives, as well as the seriousness of the responsibility she feels to ensure they are treated as human beings rather than property. As Putnam writes "By not only deciding on death for their progeny but also performing the murder themselves, these

black women assert their motherhood over societal mores" (Putnam 27). In this way, Sethe's act challenges our normative ethical intuitions and calls attention to the injustices of the very system which seeks to punish her for protecting her children from that very system. Thus, Morrison challenges us to consider how sometimes the greatest acts of parental responsibility and maternal love might also be acts of violence, particularly in a system in which violence is made ordinary.

Ma'am's choice to keep Sethe, and Sethe's choice to kill Beloved, represents an expression of personal agency in defiance of the oppression she and her children have endured as slaves. Amanda Putnam draws this connection between Ma'am and Sethe's shared violent act: "The story which implicitly explains the horrors of multiple rapes upon Ma'am, also recognizes the power of maternal choice. Ma'am could not escape rape and subsequent pregnancy, but she rebelled, by refusing motherhood until she was impregnated by someone whom she had accepted" (Putnam 39). Sethe's act of agency, conversely, manifests in her attempt to take the lives of her children in order to spare them from returning to the cruelties at Sweet Home (Morrison, *Beloved* 192). She says to Paul D., "Look like I loved 'em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love" (Morrison, *Beloved* 190). Sethe's status as a slave would have meant that she did not legally own her children. Thus, schoolteacher's disappointment of this scene comes down to the assessment that his property, Sethe and her children, has been devalued. Ultimately, Sethe's escape from Sweet Home allows her to love her children better because she can love them freely, even if this love manifests in her act of infanticide.

We will see later on that this choice, one which her own mother was forced to make, of whether to let her child live a life of pain and suffering or to take that life represents the kind of impossible choices asked of Morrison's mothers. Like the other mothers I will examine, Sethe's violence lives in the difficult choice between the lesser of two evils. As Morgenstern states,

> Morrison's mothers choose when there are no clear options. They forge a choice out of no option or choose between choice and no choice. Morrison's mothers claim the paramount value of a familial bond when they have no rights as mothers or as any other kind of subject; they manage to give their daughters the gift of entitled subjecthood even as it comes in the form of a literal or figurative death. (Morgenstern 23)

By taking ownership over her daughter's life through this violent act of killing Beloved, Sethe claims a responsibility for her daughter in spite of the system of slavery which denies her right to parenthood. In this way, both Sethe and Ma'am's acts of infanticide allow them to exercise maternal power in ways otherwise not allowed of them, but characteristic of this period and of Morrison's mothers.

Through the choices of these women, Morrison prompts her audience to grapple with the heavy responsibilities of motherhood. Before things begin to go awry with Beloved, Paul D. asks Sethe if she will have a baby with him:

> Although she laughed and took his hand, it had frightened her. She thought quickly of how good the sex would be if that is what he wanted, but mostly she was frightened by the thought of having a baby once more. Needing to be good

> enough, alert enough, strong enough, that caring – again. Having to stay alive just that much longer. O Lord, she thought, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer. (Morrison, *Beloved* 155)

Sethe's mind goes first to childbirth, and the time immediately after: to actually deliver a child into the world and then do the work of keeping it alive for months and years, all the while making her own life secondary, but sustaining it, feels like a daunting task, one that she understandably hesitates to endure again. She prays, briefly, for deliverance, for mercy. That motherlove is a killer seems at once an unavoidable reality of Sethe's experience of motherhood, as it is for Morrison's other mothers, and a succinct representation of Beloved's murder. That Morrison acknowledges this and considers it so seriously in the novel reflects a reverence for the role of the mother and for motherlove itself, one that further motivates her empathetic understanding of the difficult decisions they are made to make.

Importantly, Morrison bases the story of *Beloved* on of the very real and true story of Margaret Garner[2] who took the life of her own child in order to prevent her from enduring a life enslaved. Just like Sethe, "slave catchers surrounded her cousins' home and... she made the decision, in one soul-chilling moment, to slit the throat of her 2-year-old daughter rather than return her to slavery" (New York Times). Morrison acknowledges this direct engagement with history and how it informs the plot of the novel in its foreword:

[2] It seems likely that her name was the inspiration behind Sweet Home's white masters, Mr. And Mrs. Garner.

> Inevitably these thoughts led me to the different history of black women in this country—a history in which marriage was discouraged, impossible, or illegal; in which birthing children was required, but "having" them, being responsible for them—being, in other words, their parent—was as out of the question as freedom. Assertions of parenthood under conditions peculiar to the logic of institutional enslavement were criminal. (Morrison, Beloved xvii)

In this way, Morrison examines through Sethe the contradictory and ideologically opposed expectations of black women at that moment in history, and to explore in greater depth not only the emotional and mental toll these kinds of decisions bore on mothers, but also the generational effects passed on to children and grandchildren. In doing so, Morrison's writing gives voice, empathy, and compassion to those who have historically been denied it.

Just like Sethe, we must understand the women I will examine in the following sections and their violent actions in the context of the oppressive systems they find themselves in. As Putnam puts it, "While the violence may be wasteful or even damaging to individual psyches and broader communities, it is also a reprojection of the white oppression that has been forced on their very souls. By taking the violence forced on them and redirecting it, these characters redefine themselves as compellingly dominant women" (Putnam 26). And yet these moments of violence are not easy to swallow. Sethe and the others do real and irreversible harm to their children, and those children become adults who impose their own violence upon their children and others. However, Sethe and Ma'am's murder of their children prompt us to question our own underlying beliefs about motherhood, maternal responsibility, and right action. Thus, *Beloved* redefines

motherlove as containing and manifesting in acts of violence which exist within various oppressive systems shaped by the intersectional experience of being both black and female.

IV. Patterns of Violence in *Sula*: "I had room enough in my heart but not in my womb" (Morrison, *Sula* 71).

Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula* shares this interest in questions of maternal violence and the responsibilities of motherhood. Set in the aftermath of World War II, the story features a predominantly black town in the hills of Medallion, Ohio, referred to as "The Bottom" (deceptively named by the white citizens of Medallion in order to perpetuate racial segregation). The citizens of the Bottom endure a wide array of hardships, from PTSD left over from WWII, to poverty and disability, to racial and gendered oppression both in and outside of the Bottom. These "battles," as Morrison refers to them make up her primary focus of the novel, as she writes in the foreword:

> Marginalized by those assessing value by how "moral" the characters were—my only option was fidelity to my own sensibility. Further exploration of my own interests, questions, challenges. And since my sensibility was highly political and passionately aesthetic, it would unapologetically inform the work I did. I refused to explain, or even acknowledge, the 'problem' as anything other than an artistic one. Other questions mattered more. (Morrison xiii)

This passage reflects Morrison's decidedly amoral scope for *Sula*. In side-stepping ethical considerations, the novel rather seeks to address questions about female friendship, the

choices of black women when not dictated by society, and the risks of individualism within a uniformly individualistic community.

Given this sentiment, our question then becomes: why include this violence at all? Physical and emotional acts of violence are littered across *Sula*, between mothers and their children, traumatized veterans, and childhood friends. Why potentially taint or invalidate her female characters with these violent acts if her central purpose is to consider these other non-moral questions? We will explore this in greater depth as we examine the novel's key moments of maternal violence, however, the looming impression given the fact Morrison does include these scenes is that we cannot examine these important political, societal, and philosophical questions without the weight of morality, without the heightened stakes set by violence and by the threat of pain.

Like *Beloved*, this novel features primarily the relationships between mothers and daughters, tracing three generations of women leading to the friendship of Nel and Sula – as well as the violence these women enact upon themselves, their children, and each other; furthermore, this violence does not stay confined to one family, but reaches beyond to shape the lives of others in the Bottom. Eva Peace, the pinnacle matriarch of this family, hurts her children and herself. Her daughter, Hannah Peace, hurts herself, the town, and her daughter Sula. Finally, Sula hurts her best friend Nel, the town, and her grandmother. In this way, this pattern of violence passed down across generations of mothers and children manifests in the familial structures of *Sula*, beginning with Eva, cycling through Hannah, pouring through Sula, and ending with Eva. Morrison represents the full scope of their lives in the novel, demonstrating how violence endured and inflicted by a mother manifests in the life of her children and even finds its way back to

the mother again, much like in *Beloved*. However, *Sula* differs from *Beloved* and even *A Mercy* in that the consequences of the violence exhibited in this family seep out into the life of the community, and particularly, into the life of Sula's best friend Nel. Through their friendship, Morrison shows how violence in one family can impact those outside of it, and thus how this pattern of violence effect others in the community.

Like Sethe, matriarch Eva takes the life of her adult son, Plum. Suffering from addiction and crippling PTSD (a remnant of his time as a soldier during WWII), Plum lives in his mother's house, and spends most of his time consuming drugs. While checking in on him one afternoon, Eva mistakes the red liquid beside his bed for strawberry punch and inadvertently drinks his bloody water (Morrison Sula 47). This scene echoes the moments immediately following Beloved's murder in which Denver is said to have "took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister," signaling a comparison between Eva and Sethe (Morrison, *Beloved* 179). With tears streaming down her face, Eva begins to pour kerosene over her son's body before igniting a newspaper and tossing it onto the bed (Morrison, *Sula* 47). Though I will analyze this passage in greater depth later on, it is important to note here how Eva's choice to take the life of her son signifies a key moment in the pattern of maternal violence which appears in *Sula,* and places her in direct comparison with Sethe.

In fact, Plum's murder is preceded by a different act of violence performed by Eva onto her son, one that reflects her intense, life-and-death maternal philosophy. After the abandonment of her husband Boyboy, Eva struggles to keep her infant children alive and fed. Constipated and inconsolable, baby Plum screams with discomfort until finally Eva must take action:

> The last food staple in the house she had rammed up her baby's behind to keep from hurting him too much when she opened up his bowels to pull the stools out. He had been screaming fit to kill, but when she found his hole at last and stuck her finger up in it, the shock was so great he was suddenly quiet. (Morrison, *Sula* 70)

This scene situates Eva's extreme and, at times, violent actions in the context of the poverty and starvation she navigated as a single mother. The description of Plum as "fit to kill" further hints at Eva's future acts of violence against her son. While that violent moment will end in the death of her son, this violent act is presented as necessary to support the health of her child; in some way, perhaps even to save his life. In this way, Eva's violent actions span the novel and these critical moments define her maternal philosophy as one which deals in both life and death.

Yet Eva's acts of violence do not extend solely to her children; after the abovementioned incident with Plum, Eva disappears for ten months and returns with a missing leg. The rumor accepted by her children and by the town goes that Eva had her leg run over by a train in order to obtain the insurance money which the family presumably lives on for the rest of the novel (Morrison, *Sula* 31). To do this she leaves her children in the care of a neighbor, Mrs. Suggs, before going off to do what no one ever truly knows she does do: "Eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg. First she reclaimed her children, next she gave the surprised Mrs. Suggs[3] a ten dollar bill, later she started building a house on

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[3] That the children are made to stay with a Mrs. Suggs further strengthens the connection between Eva and Sethe, whose mother-in-law is called "Baby Suggs."

Carpenter's Road, sixty feet from BoyBoy's one-room cabin, which she rented out" (Morrison, *Sula* 35). Throughout the novel, the mystery of how exactly Eva lost her leg remains intact; this lack of clear information seems indicative of Eva's revealing the story to no one, and to no one presuming the authority to know, as if to respect her pride and privacy. Eva's sacrifice allows her to take her children out of poverty and take care of them properly, demonstrating the extent to which Eva is committed to providing for her children, and the way that for her, motherhood necessarily entails sacrifice. We might compare this act of rescue to Sethe's escape from slavery with her children; both women's sacrifices enabled their children to have lives better than their own. This money also allows her to support many children, including her granddaughter Sula, as well as to become a vital fixture in the Bottom's community life as a boarding house. Thus, Eva's act represents how this society subtly relies on the violent love of mothers like Eva, who occupies an important political and social position in this community[4]. In this way, Eva's maternal violence extends beyond her children to herself, as a means of providing for them and for the community more broadly.

Eva's relationship with Hannah bears the marks of a more emotional violence, rather than a physical one. While caring for her mother one day, Hannah asks, "Mamma, did you ever love us?" to which Eva responds "No. I don't reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin'" (Morrison, *Sula* 67). Eva, feeling frustrated and disrespected by Hannah's question, pushes her daughter to elaborate, to which Hannah says, "I didn't mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like. Like.

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[4] Scholar Janice M. Sokoloff describes the name "Eva" as one which "mythically implies the ancestral mother of us all" (430).

Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?" (68). This conversation represents the key differences between Hannah and Eva's maternal philosophies which results in a kind of emotional violence done onto Hannah. Where Hannah's definition of motherlove entails play and expressions of love, Eva's definition of motherlove is grounded in survival and keeping her children alive. What Eva saw as acts of love Hannah saw as an absence of it. This essential misunderstanding forges the emotional detachment which characterizes Hannah and Eva's relationship. We might imagine how this emotional distance was exacerbated by the physical distance of Eva leaving her children for ten months and returning later without a leg (Morrison, *Sula* 35). From Hannah, Pearl, and Plum's perspectives, their mother abandons them for a year and a half, only to return without one of her legs. Thus, the emotional violence done unto Eva's children, and it seems to Hannah especially, manifests in absences – i.e., the eighteen months of abandonment, Eva's leg, and the lack of playful love.

While Hannah never physically harms Sula, their relationship shares a similar emotional violence to that which appears in Hannah and Eva's relationship. Though they live together in Eva's house, Sula and Hannah seem to coexist as roommates more than they do as mother and daughter. In fact, Nel and Sula become close, in part, because of their shared loneliness: "Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (Morrison, *Sula* 52). This maternal distance is actualized when Sula overhears a conversation between Hannah and her friends about their children. One of the women tries to deny her love for her child and Hannah pushes back, saying, "sure you do. You love her like I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the

difference" (57). This moment mirrors the conversation between Hannah and Eva in which Eva admits to not loving Hannah in the way she hungers for. Hannah, in much the same way, does not love Sula in the way she desires. As Putnam writes,

> It is not surprising that Hannah repeats this type of phrasing (and abuse) to her own daughter, not willingly recognizing the damage inflicted on herself in the same situation. But Sula's maternal abandonment is real and affects her self-image. Suddenly, Sula is vulnerable, since (like Pecola), if a young black girl cannot expect her own mother to enjoy her unconditionally, it is unlikely that the rest of the world will do so. (Putnam 34)

It is difficult to say why Hannah does not practice the kind of mothering she wanted from Eva; perhaps the fact that she does not is reflective of the emotional detachment instilled in her by Eva's mothering. Because these daughters are deprived of the motherlove they so deeply desire, a distance grows between these respective mothers and daughters, one that manifests in later acts of emotional and physical violence in the daughters' lives. For Hannah, the emotional violence which is deprivation of motherlove fosters the same sort of distance between her and her own daughter.

One manifestation of this emotional distance takes place during Hannah's accidental, mystical, and almost inevitable seeming death; for while Eva tries to save Hannah, Sula seems to simply watch her mother burn. Though she cannot even walk or really stand properly on her own, Eva's first impulse is to sacrifice herself, by hurling her body out of the window:

> Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter's body with her own. She lifted her heavy frame up on her good leg, and with fists and arms smashed the windowpane. Using her stump as support on the windowsill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window... She missed and came down some twelve feet from Hannah's smoke. (Morrison, Sula 76)

Once again, Eva's motherlove manifests in life and death acts of self-inflicted violence. [5] Because of this action, she and Hannah are both taken away on ambulances: "mother and daughter were placed on stretchers and carried to the ambulance" (Morrison, *Sula* 77). However, later reflecting on the moment she crawled toward her burning daughter, Eva observes Sula sitting on the porch, watching, or so it seemed:

> When Eva, who was never one to hide the faults of her children, mentioned what she thought she'd seen to a few friends, they said it was natural. Sula was probably struck dumb, as anybody would be who saw her own mamma burn up. Eva said yes, but inside she disagreed and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed but because she was interested. (Morrison, *Sula* 78)

What Eva detects in Sula is not malice, not pleasure, not even a sense of anger or vengeance towards her mother, but what seems like a genuine interest in watching her mother burn alive. This moment reflects Sula's detachment from moments of violence as

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[5] As Janice M. Sokoloff writes: "Ironically, Eva has witnessed the death of two of her children: One she has caused, the other she has failed to prevent" (432).

a result of Hannah's emotional violence depriving Sula of love and affection. It also captures the moral tension of Sula's choices in a way that continues to occur throughout the novel; Sula's actions, and non-actions, are not a product of cruelty or a desire for suffering, but of curiosity. What this means is that while Sula means no ill-will in watching her mother burn or later in sleeping with Nel's husband, the harm she creates is still there and palpable. In this moment, Eva and Sula seem to be placed right next to each other in a moment of direct comparison. Whereas Eva is literally moved to yet another act of self-inflicted violence, Sula remains still. Perhaps in this way, Eva fights against the divine justice of the Bottom, whereas Sula allows this action to be carried out without interference. However, this moment is also narrated, and judged, through Eva's eyes. Ultimately, this early moment in Sula's life demonstrates the way she has internalized her mother's emotional detachment and the moment it begins to manifest in her own life.

The effects of this emotional violence appear also in Sula's willingness to slice off her fingertip in defense of Nel and herself, a scene which mirrors both Hannah's emotional distance and Eva's self-injury. While walking home one day, Sula and Nel are blocked by a group of little white boys seeking to antagonize, even harm the girls. Rather than turn and run away or attempt to fight them, "Sula reached into her coat pocket and pulled out Eva's paring knife... She slashed off only the tip of her finger" (Morrison, *Sula* 54). As Putnam describes this act:

> Sula's willingness to mutilate herself is a means to show strength, offering new realizations of what is capable within violence. Instead of pitifully attacking the

> boys, who are taller, older, and stronger, and not succeeding, she chooses to harm that which she has the most control over: herself. (Putnam 29)

This moment embodies Sula's strength, and amounts to an act of resistance against the oppressive racist and misogynistic forces which primarily govern their world. It also reflects Sula's commitment to her ideological values over her physical well-being; she exhibits this same behavior later even after she returns to the Bottom. In this way, Sula's action reflects the way she has internalized both Hannah's emotional numbness and Eva's example of almost absurd physical sacrifice. Sokoloff further makes the connection between Sula and Eva's sanguinary actions: "What Eva enacts in the interest of preserving her children from poverty, Sula transforms into a move that seeks not merely to survive, but to challenge threatening forces" (Sokoloff 432). While cutting off the tip of her finger, Sula seems to echo Eva's own self-mutilation; that Sula uses Eva's paring knife to do so emphasizes the important connection between the granddaughter and her grandmother (Sokoloff 432). Whereas Sula's action serves to stand up against the harassment of the little boys, normalized under the systems of racial and gendered oppression at play, Eva's reflects her sense of maternal responsibility for her children. Both take violent courses of action, but these actions serve markedly different purposes. Thus, Sula's self-harm seems to be a manifestation of violence learned from both her mother and grandmother. This scene also demonstrates the way that these engrained acts of violence within a family begin to affect and involve other members of the community; not for the last time, Nel becomes an accomplice in Sula's violent deeds.

Perhaps the central act of emotional violence which occurs in the novel takes place when Sula sleeps with Nel's husband Jude; this action reflects yet another

manifestation of Sula's mother-taught emotional detachment. The women do not address this action until later when Sula has finally returned to the Bottom and on her own death bed, and Nel asks Sula why she did it: "Well, there was this space in front of me, behind me, in my head. Some space. And Jude filled it up. That's all. He just filled up the space" (Morrison, *Sula* 144). These words reflect Sula's emotional detachment, both from Jude, in that she did not sleep with him because she loved or even cared for him, but also from Nel whose emotions and experience in this situation Sula seems entirely ignorant of and indifferent to. Morrison conveys Nel's thoughts about this moment: "Sula couldn't give her a sensible answer because she didn't know. Would be, in fact, the last to know. Talking to her about right and wrong was like talking to the Dewey's" (Morrison, *Sula* 145). Nel knows Sula so well she understands Sula's inability to act well and emotionally. As we will address later, this does not negate the harm caused or even excuse Sula of acting in a way that we may deem to be immoral. It does at least demonstrate the way in which Sula repeats the same sort of emotional detachment, i.e., violence, she experienced from her mother when she sleeps with Jude.

This emotional violence further seeps into the community when Sula returns from college and brings disruption in much the same way as Hannah did. Like her mother, Sula sleeps with any man she can find, regardless of their marital or social status, and yet with Sula, the community is determined to hate her: "they forgot about Hannah's easy ways (or their own) and said she was a bitch. Everybody remembered the plague of robins that announced [Sula's] return, and the tale about her watching Hannah burn was stirred up again" (Morrison, *Sula* 112). Putnam draws this connection between violence learned at home and that executed in the community:

> Disturbing the development of necessary community-based sentiments, such as empathy or social identification, the mother violence creates children (and subsequently adults) who feel detached from others in their community, allowing the twisted familial violence to be perpetuated. Home, then, becomes a place to learn pain, while community becomes a place to act it out. (Putnam 26-27)

This explains why Sula sees no issue sleeping with Jude or any of the other women of the Bottom. That she never was able to connect with her mother taught her early on to numb herself to feelings of connection and guilt and feels no responsibility to her friends or to those in her community to respect their relationships or to avoid causing them harm.[6]

Sula's emotional violence comes into fruition most fully in her relationship with Eva upon returning to the Bottom, both in threatening physical violence and in sending her away to a home. The two women get into an argument about whether Sula now that she has grown up ought to marry and have children of her own, to which Sula famously remarks "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself;" she continues this sentiment later on when she says, "I ain't never going to need you. And you know what? Maybe one night when you dozing in that wagon flicking flies and swallowing spit, maybe I'll just show on up here with some kerosene and—who knows—you may make

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[6] Interestingly, it seems to be this role which prompts the townspeople to treat one another with more grace than before:

> "Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes, and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (Morrison, *Sula* 117-118).

By making Sula into a moral scapegoat upon which they can toss off their own misgivings, the people of the Bottom actually embrace tolerance and empathy in new ways and are able to love one another better.

the brightest flame of them all" (Morrison, Sula 92 and 94). Again, Sokoloff identifies the powerful connection between Sula and Eva: "What they share is remarkable energy. Where they differ is that the vitality Eva has spent a lifetime investing in endurance, Sula redirects into defiance" (Sokoloff 433). Determined to maintain her independence, Sula rebels against her grandmother's expectation that she must marry and have children of her own, and in the same breath, threatens the same violence against Eva which she did unto Plum, i.e., burning her alive. In doing so, Sula confronts Eva with the immorality of her action and forces Eva to reflect on what constitutes the hardest and worst thing she might ever have had to do, just as Beloved does to Sethe. Immediately following this scene, Morrison reveals that Sula has Eva sent to a nursing home, thereby creating a physical distance between herself and her grandmother. Putnam analyzes Sula's choice in the context of her maternal lessons:

> And yet her decision makes sense to her because she recognizes no personal connection to her grandmother (or to her dead mother)—and they are the ones who taught her how to feel that way. She rebels against standard expectations for daughters (and women at large), ignoring the dictates of society and behaving with passive violence to those who taught her those emotions. (Putnam 35)

The lessons which Hannah and Eva's action have taught Sula are those of "passive violence," the kind which does its harm through lack of action. Sula does not actually light Eva on fire; her power is in her words and her intense commitment to her living an independent life, alone. It seems also that because Sula insists upon not becoming a mother, not having children of her own to pass these violent habits onto, the emotional violence she has inherited manifests in her relationships with her mother and with Eva.

Thus, Sula completes this cycle of generational violence, taking what she has learned from her mother and grandmother about emotional detachment, and treating Eva in the same way.

Thus, we can draw a direct line from a mother's violence to violence enacted by her children. Eva's physical violence to Plum and her emotional violence to Hannah manifest in Hannah's relationship with Sula. Hannah and Sula's emotional distance relationship informs Sula's harm to Nel by sleeping with Jude, her disruption of the Bottom's social and political order, and ultimately her rejection of Eva. Though Sula and Nel's friendship might be the central focus of the novel, Morrison takes care to tell a generational story, one that follows mothers and grandmothers, children, and communities, as the inner life of one family line effects those outside of it. Now that we have identified and traced this pattern, I will turn to address how and why Morrison implements this pattern of violence a story about female relationships to employ this same lens of empathy and tolerance we see in *Beloved*, and later, in *A Mercy*. To answer these questions, I shall begin by this next section by returning to a few of the major moments of violence I mentioned before: namely, Plum's death, Sula's sleeping with Jude.

V. Discussion of Violence in *Sula*: "About who was good. How you know it was you?... I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me" (Morrison, *Sula* 146).

Morrison's description of Plum's death prompts the reader to separate Eva from the act of killing her son and thus invites her audience to consider Eva's choice as a

moral good. As we discussed, Plum suffers from PTSD and severe addiction left over from his time spent fighting in World War I. Not sure how to care for him, Eva ultimately decides to take his life by burning him alive:

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

The third-person omniscient narrator describes this scene with Plum at the center, not Eva, and in this way, temporarily removes her from the act. Plum "opens his eyes" and sees "what he imagines," not necessarily what happens; in this way, Morrison asks us to consider what truly occurred and whether the truth of this moment is the most significant aspect of it. Who's experience of this moment matters more: Eva or Plum? The next lines, imbued with Morrison's magical realist touch, describe Plum as he watches a great bird, not his mother, pour a "wet lightness over him." It seems likely that Plum does not register that his mother is the person behind this deed, which keeps him from the feeling of abandonment that Beloved feels, or the feeling of not being wanted which Hannah experiences. Instead, Plum can imagine this scene as a divinely sent to conduct this "baptism," a spiritual cleansing, "a blessing," a mercy even. Because he sees the moment this way, Plum can know that "Everything is going to be all right" and find peace in the comfort of "the bright hole of sleep." In this way, Plum seems to experience death at the hands of his mother as an overwhelmingly positive event. The words "murder" or "kill" are never used to describe this scene. By prioritizing Plum's experience of this moment over Eva's, Morrison refuses to pass judgement on Eva for killing her son and invites her

reader to do the same, and in doing so, challenges her audience to consider this act of maternal violence as one of love and of grace.

Like Sethe, Eva sees her act of child-murder as one which serves the best interest of her child, particularly by allowing Plum to die with dignity; likewise, their acts of infanticide prompt us to question what constitutes an act of love and where the responsibilities of motherhood lie. Eva explains this choice to Hannah during their argument, saying: "After all that carryin' on, just gettin' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb... I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man" (Morrison, *Sula* 71-72). Scholar Morgenstern interprets Eva's action as taking responsibility for his son's life:

> But Morrison's accounts of maternal psychopathology, affect, and conflict, or the lack thereof, also engage crucially with ethical discourse. Eva, for example, is able to kill her son precisely because she accepts absolute or sovereign responsibility for his life... How presumptuous, one might conclude... What of the fact that her particular goal is to kill her son before he regresses too profoundly? He wants, as she says, to crawl back into her womb—which would kill her and would certainly not constitute a dignified place for him to be. (Morgenstern 8)

Morrison's mothers are often made to choose between the lesser of two evils. Just as Sethe must choose for her children between a life enslaved and death by her own hands, Eva must choose for Plum between a life of suffering and addiction or death by her own hands. Just as Sethe claims responsibility for her children by choosing what she sees as

the lesser of two evils, so too does Eva accept responsibility for Plum's life, in hopes of providing him with a more peaceful and dignified death.

Sethe and Eva's choice to take the life of their children reflects Morrison's understanding of the burdens of motherhood, an appreciation of the strength and sacrifice it requires, just as much as it represents a decision made in the child's best interest. Like Beloved's ghost when she returns to 124, Plum begins reverting back into a child in his mother's house, and given his infant-like[7] state, Eva must take on the difficult responsibility for his life. Eva, like Sethe, feels the tension between knowing that she cannot care for him the way she did when he was a baby, or birth him again, and also not wanting that life for him. Sethe's consideration of having another baby with Paul D. aligns with Eva's choice here: "Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, that caring – again. Having to stay alive just that much longer" (*Beloved* 155). By articulating this fear in both Sethe and Eva, Morrison pushes back against the notion that a woman's value lies solely in her ability to keep her child alive. For Plum to crawl back in Eva's womb would place her in physical danger; for Sethe and for Eva, to give birth to and care for a child is itself a life-threatening act, one that demands immense strength. Through Sethe and Eva, Morrison affirms that a woman's worth exists beyond her ability to keep her child alive.

Thus, we see how Morrison employs distance in her description of Plum's death and Eva's choice, prompting her reader to suspend judgement and attempt to empathize with her decision to kill Plum. How should we as readers feel about Sethe and Eva's acts

[7] Like Beloved's ghost, Plum's devolution back into a a childlike state of infancy is evidenced by his consumption of sweets: "There in the corner was a half-eaten store-bought cherry pie. Balled-up candy wrappers and empty pop bottles peeped from under the dresser" (Morrison, *Sula* 46).

of killing their children? As Morrison expresses in the foreword of the novel, this question actually seems to be beside the point, which is more about the way we evaluate expressions of motherlove and hold them unjustly to conventional standards of morality. Putnam argues that

> Morrison establishes child murder as the ultimate form of mother violence, exposing the complexities of the mothering construct in terms of creation and destruction. By not only deciding on death for their progeny but also performing the murder themselves, these black women assert their motherhood over societal mores. (Putnam 27)

We are not called to objectively determine the morality of these acts, more so the emotions and difficult choices which led to them. However, these violent actions have consequences beyond their intentions, often destructive ones, both for those who receive them and for others affected by them. We are asked to consider Morrison's proposition that perhaps motherhood exists outside of conventional morality. She prompts her audience to suspend our own moral judgements, to consider what constitutes an act of motherlove, and to sit with the weighty responsibilities of motherhood, particularly those which we may actively contribute to.

Another way Morrison prompts her reader to suspend judgement is by providing the perspectives of many different women, across generations. *Sula* spans two familial lines and goes in depth into the story of at least six different women. This tension manifests perhaps most strongly in the differing definitions of motherlove held by Eva and Hannah. While Eva's definition of motherlove is grounded in survival, Hannah's definition of motherlove entails play. For Eva, the act of keeping her children alive serves

as a testament to her love for her children. Eva's conception of motherlove seems grounded mostly in her commitment to keeping her children alive: "what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?" (Morrison, *Sula* 69). In this conversation Eva sets up one standard of motherlove: that the mother keeps herself and her children alive collectively share priority, and everything else matters less. And yet Hannah clearly feels there was something missing from Eva's expressions of motherlove: "I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you, know, play with us?" (Morrison, *Sula* 68). Both of these philosophies of motherhood feel intuitively compelling. Morrison makes it possible to appreciate the sacrifices Eva made simply in order to keep herself and her children alive, much less fed and in a large home, while also understanding Hannah's desire to have her mother recognize value in her, to love her for more than simply being alive. What's more is the way we see the faults in both of these mothering definitions and the violent ways they manifest in Sula's life. In this way, Morrison writes very compellingly for each of these women without invalidating the experiences of the others, encouraging her audience to recontextualize their violent actions rather than taking a side or passing judgement on them.

Eva and Hannah's relationship, as well as Hannah and Sula's, also evidences the way that emotional violence can be just as detrimental as physical violence. Putnam describes the effects of this emotional violence:

> But the emotional violence of discovering Sula's mother's passive hostility for her helps create a detachment in Sula, allowing her to watch death and other tragedies from an easy distance. Sula later watches her mother burn to death in

> their backyard, and grandmother Eva believes the girl did so out of twisted curiosity. Having learned from her mother the possibility of loving, but remaining remote, and having learned from her grandmother that murder may be a part of family life (as Eva murders her own son), Sula remains aloof from her mother's fiery death, just as she was when she accidentally killed Chicken Little. (Putnam 34)

These acts of emotional violence are no less formative than those of physical violence, as Morrison shows that abandonment, rejection, and even measured indifference can impact a child just as much as burns and finger cuts. When we are able to trace the potent consequences of emotional harm along with those of bodily injury, we better account for all of the ways violent patterns manifest in the relationships between mothers and their children.

In addition to this varied viewpoint, *Sula* also differs from *Beloved*[8] and *A Mercy* in that it explores how these acts of maternal violence often impact those outside of the nuclear family and bear consequences for the larger community. This happens in several small ways in Sula as the people of the Bottom begin to associate Sula with damage and violence, but perhaps most significantly when Sula sleeps with Nel's husband Jude. As Morrison writes in the foreword,

> Outlaw women are fascinating—not always for their behavior, but because historically women are seen as naturally disruptive and their status an illegal one

[8] While the community of mothers at the end of *Beloved* is essential in ridding Beloved's ghost from the haunts of 124, as Demetrakopoulos writes, "The force that finally exorcises Beloved, however, is the community of mothers led by Ella, who also killed an infant of hers, born of a white man who abused her..." the troubles stay notably in that home, between the mothers and daughters who live there (Demetrakopoulos 57).

> from birth if it is not under the rule of men... In Sula I wanted to explore the consequences of what that escape might be, on not only a conventional black society, but on female friendship. (Morrison xvii)

By encouraging her audience to understand Sula as a character who acts without care for her community's expectations of her behavior and regardless of the way she is seen by others, Morrison's point seems to be that what matters is not whether Sula abides by some abstract morality or even one that respects community norms[9]; Sula's act seems most wrong because she betrays Nel and hurts her. In this way, *Sula* is not about rejecting morality altogether but reconsidering what acting morally truly means, what our responsibilities are to one another, and how violence passed down through generations can result in violence to the community.

In conclusion, we see in *Sula* just as we saw in *Beloved* mothers who treat their children violently, in ways that often constitute expressions of love and protection. These acts of violence are often internalized and reproduced by children in their own lives and even extend to their own children. Like in Beloved, Morrison employs certain narrative tactics in order to impose a sense of distance between the violent act, the actor, and the audience; by temporarily holding these aloft and suspending our judgment of them we are able to empathize with these women and better understand their violent acts as a product of their own violent backgrounds. We can draw this line of violence from grandmother to mother to children, and, differently to *Beloved*, now beyond the family into the

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[9] Morrison, in *Sula*'s foreword, writes, "In that atmosphere of "What would you be doing or thinking if there was no gaze or hand to stop you?" I began to think about just what that kind of license would have been like for us black women forty years earlier. We were being encouraged to think of ourselves as our own salvation, to be our own best friends. What could that mean in 1969 that it had not meant in the 1920s? The image of the woman who was both envied and cautioned against came to mind" (xv).

community. *Sula* uniquely shows how these acts of violence manifest in harm done to the community at large as well as to the family unit. Additionally, these acts of violence need not always be strictly physical; those acts of emotional violence prompt the same repetition of harm to one's children and community as those more physical acts. As we begin to examine *A Mercy*, these questions about why mothers enact violence upon their children and who these actions ultimately impact, will remain at the center of our discussion.

VI. Patterns of Violence in *A Mercy*: "Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 167).

One of Morrison's last books to be published, *A Mercy* (2008) features a raw and less clear picture of maternal violence, placing it alongside *Beloved* and *Sula* in its investigation of patterned violence and its consequences, this time through the lens of early American wilderness. Set among the unsettled territories of the colonial United States, the novel primarily follows a few years in the life of Florens, a young black girl born a slave on properties of white colonists that would become Maryland. At the beginning of the story, Florens is traded to a young Dutch immigrant, Jacob Vaark, and moved to his property in the northern Virginia region, where she comes to know his wife Rebecca, and their servants Lina and Sorrow. Like *Beloved* and *Sula*, most of the story features the daily joys and trials of this group of women, while Vaark is away traveling on business.

Just as the political and social climates of *Beloved* and *Sula* inform our readings of maternal violence therein, *A Mercy*'s setting in early colonial America provides an important lens through which to understand the novel's moments of mother-child violence and its definitions of motherhood. *A Mercy* explores a time in American history in which laws and statutes had not yet been established. There is little formal government, and social order depends mostly on individual power, wit, and strength. Likewise, systems of racial and gendered injustice had not yet been engrained into U.S. law and so function more as a network of simultaneously contradictory and unquestionable customs. All of this means that the rules which give order to Morrison's other books and which we often see her characters fight against are present in a different, more chaotic form. In *A Mercy*, Morgenstern discusses the importance of this perspective:

> To be drawn backward is to be drawn toward historical source material, to the moment when race and slavery emerges as ways to organize ethical wilderness for white subjects; but it is also to be drawn toward yet another way of figuring those questions of subjecthood, ethics, and black life in America that have always arrested Morrison's attention. (Morgenstern 9)

Importantly, these systems still exist, just in their nascent forms, ones inherited from various European white supremacist cultures, i.e., England, Spain, and the Netherlands. The novel largely explores how these inherited systems of injustice take on a new form as the American colonies begin to form their own new identity, redefine power and strength, and create their own systems of order and injustice. By writing this novel in colonial America, she explores the early defining of systemic injustices, by returning to their

origin. In this way, motherhood in *A Mercy* functions differently because it is less stringently held to specific definitions and expectations. Just as Morrison examines what it means to be a citizen, a human being, and property, she looks closely at what motherhood means and how it is informed by notions of biology, race, and ownership. The mother-child relationships in *A Mercy* are unconventional, and yet we see the same cyclical patterns of violence manifest even here in colonial America.

Because of this lack of definition that looms in the background of the novel, almost all of the characters are defined by their disconnectedness, from their loved ones and from one another. Lina once reflects about the group: "They were orphans, each and all" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 69). What could it mean for each of these characters to be orphans? What about their setting in the novel fosters this division, this separation from a loving, nurturing force? On one level, this passage figuratively corresponds to the early colonies' position of being far away from the European motherland of England, Spain, and the like. It also very literally describes Florens' status now that she has been taken from her mother. As we come to learn, it also accurately captures the reality of Lina who has been taken from her community, of Sorrow found half-drowned and abandoned in a river, of Rebekka who left her own mother and family behind in England, and even of Jakob who was himself an orphan and grew up in alone in a poorhouse. Truly, it seems each of these characters is an orphan in their own way. Our question then becomes, what does mother-hunger look like in a land where everyone is separated from their figurative mother? How is our study of maternal violence complicated by this lack of motherhood, or by more nuanced definitions of it?

Just like in *Beloved* and in *Sula*, we see a pattern of violence cycle through mothers and their offspring, and impact those outside the family unit. Early in the novel, Florens' mother begs the man who owns them to trade Florens in order to satisfy his debt to Vaark (Morrison, *A Mercy* 8). This initial act of emotional violence ignites Florens' feeling of abandonment and plants the seed for future acts of both emotional and physical violence which take place in the rest of the novel. Florens' abandonment manifests in a desire to please others, especially Lina and Rebekka to whom she answers. It also manifests in her desire for love and affection from the blacksmith who comes to work on the property. Finally, it results in Florens' acts of physical violence to the blacksmith and the little boy he looks after. In this way, *A Mercy* features a pattern of violence similar to *Beloved* and *Sula*, one initiated by the harm done to Florens by her mother.

By insisting that Florens be traded away instead of her son, Minha Mae fosters deep feelings of abandonment in her daughter. In a love letter to the blacksmith, Florens recalls the day Minha Mae seemingly chose her brother over herself: "Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes the balance due;" she continues this recollection after learning about Sorrow's pregnancy, stating, "I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise me to look at them hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 8-9). It is in this letter[10] addressed to the blacksmith (one that he will never read) that Florens tells the story of her mother's abandonment from her perspective, and this moment stays with her so much so that the

[10] The metafictional delivery of this information, and of the novel more broadly, is worth noting and is something I will discuss more later on.

mere suggestion that Sorrow will have a baby, reminds her of her own mother who seemingly chose to keep her baby brother over her. As Putnam describes it, "Instead of realizing the great sacrifice her mother has just made for her daughter, Florens only understands her own abandonment—and this shapes her entire future" (Putnam 32). We see that it does not occur to Florens that her mother may have sent her away out of love and a sense of protection for her daughter; she can only understand it as rejection and a kind of abandonment, reading into it that her life was less valuable to her mother than that of her brother. We do not learn why she does this until the end of the novel, and Florens never learns. This moment passes relatively quickly in this opening chapter, and yet Morrison conveys clearly the anger and frustration which Florens feels at his act of abandonment and demonstrates the way this informs Florens' new life in the north.

Once settled on the new Vaark property, Florens seeks out new avenues of affection and love to quell her feelings of abandonment, particularly by trying to please Rebekka and Lina. As a child on Jakob's property, her role in the dynamic between these women is to be obedient. They observe in her: "Not only was she consistently trustworthy, she was deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 72). This desire to please, this craving for affection and love is encapsulated by the term "mother hunger" which Morrison uses just a page later: "Florens would sigh then, her head on Lina's shoulder and when sleep came the little girl's smile lingered. Mother hunger – to be one or have one – both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 73). Like Beloved, Hannah, or Sula, Florens' feeling of rejection, the

maternal violence of abandonment, and mother-hunger[11] come to define her relationships with the other women on Vaark's property.

Florens' experience of maternal rejection manifests in her desire for the blacksmith to love and accept her. When she finally arrives to retrieve the blacksmith who will heal Rebekka, Florens daydreams about what it would mean for her to stay there with him:

> Here I am not the one to throw out. No one steals my warmth and shoes because I am small. No one handles my backside. No one whinnies like sheep or goat because I drop in fear and weakness. No one screams at the sight of me. No one watches my body for how it is unseemly. With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 161)

We see how Florens has internalized her mother's abandonment and now places all sense of belonging, acceptance, and love in what she has imagined about the blacksmith. The blacksmith also importantly represents a kind of freedom to Florens; when she imagines him, it is not only that she pictures being loved, but that his independence presents Florens with the tempting idea of her own freedom, what it would look like to be her own person, by belonging to him. However, even this freedom seems to be one contingent on trading one type of ownership for another. This definition of love, perhaps more importantly, reflects Florens' status as an enslaved person, that is property, in which the

[11] This deep craving for one's mother, maybe simply a mother, is one we see in many of the mother-child relationships I have explored thus far: in Sethe-Beloved-Denver and in Eva-Hannah-Sula. Perhaps all of Morrison's mother-child relationships are driven by this desire to be or to have, a mother.

greatest love she can imagine looks like ownership. For Florens, getting to choose who owns her represents the highest form of love and freedom she can imagine.

Florens' fears of abandonment learned from her mother come into fruition in her violent act against Malaik. While the blacksmith is away taking care of Rebekkah, Florens stays to watch Malaik, the little boy whom the blacksmith has taken temporary guardianship over. Immediately, there is a palpable discord between Florens and the little boy, almost a sense of competition. Florens hides his doll from him, provoking an endless screaming match which she can only avoid by leaving the house. When she finally returns, Malaik's screaming begins again and in her frustration Florens shakes the boy to get him to stop:

> Seeing the boy returns to screaming and that is when I clutch him. I am trying to stop him not hurt him. That is why I pull his arm. To make him stop. Stop it. And yes I do hear the shoulder crack but the sound is small, no more than the crack a wing of roast grouse makes when you tear it, warm and tender, from its breast. He screams screams then faints. A little blood comes from his mouth hitting the table corner. Only a little. He drops into a fainting just as I hear you shout. I don't hear your horse only your shout and know I am lost because your shout is not my name. Not me. Him. Malaik you shout. Malaik. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 164-165)

We can connect this act of violence, though accidental, to Florens' fear and insecurity surrounding little boys. The emotional violence of her mother's abandonment, of choosing to keep her little brother instead of herself, corresponds directly to the violence Florens enacts here. Though she did not mean to seriously hurt him in the way she did, Florens' shaking Malaik represents her jealousy over her brother. When the blacksmith

returns and sees the little boy hurt, Florens' worst fears and past wounds about a little boy being chosen over her are reawakened; the wounds cut anew. Once again, a little boy is chosen over her.

Florens' violence to Malaik prompts the blacksmith's act of violence toward her. The blacksmith walks in and sees Malaik hurt. They then get into an argument in which the blacksmith, dripping with a kind of emotional violence, says he sees her as a slave: "Each word that follows cuts" Florens says (Morrison, *A Mercy* 165). As the conversation becomes more heated and Florens feels more hurt by his words, an anger rises in her – "Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand" (167). In this single line, Morrison describes Florens picking up a hammer. The chapter ends and the next moment turns to Willy and Scully's outsider perspective on the home which, after the death of Jakob, is entirely run by women. They observe how all the women have changed:

> Strangest was Florens. The docile creature they knew had turned feral. When they saw her stomping down the road two days after the smithy had visited Mistress' sickbed and gone, they were slow to recognize her as a living person. First because she was so blood-spattered and bedraggled and, second, because she passed right by them. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 172)

This very brief mention of Florens holding a hammer and then the description of her as "blood spattered" indicates to us that some bloody act has taken place. Thus, the blacksmith's emotional violence to Florens, that of rejecting her in the same way her mother seemed to, prompts this act of physical violence to both Malaik and to the blacksmith. Though she loves him, she is moved to hurt him. In this way, we can trace

this pattern of violence from Minha Mae to Florens, from Florens to the little boy, and from Florens to the blacksmith.

VII. Discussion of Violence in *A Mercy*: "It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 195).

Like Sethe and Eva's acts of infanticide, Minha Mae means her act of emotional violence as one which she hopes will be in the best interest of her child, that might save Florens from suffering the same abuse which she herself endured on D'Ortega's land. It is not until the last chapter of the novel that we learn for certain why Florens' mother sends her away:

> There is no protection but there is difference... I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as human child , not pieces of eight... It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing. Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mae. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 195)

Florens' mother gives her away not because she dislikes her or because she prefers her son; she does so with the hope that Jacob will treat her daughter better than she has been treated by D'Ortega. Among the startling realities of this place, she names the

dehumanizing treatment of herself and her children within the house, as well as the sexual assault of which Florens is a product, that she hopes she can help her daughter escape. Minha Mae's abandonment of Florens stands beside Sethe and Eva's infanticide, as violent acts done in the best interest of the child. Her choice, like Sethe and Eva's, is between the lesser of two evils: have her child stay without her in a place in which she is sure to experience dehumanizing oppression and sexual abuse, or trade her away to a stranger knowing not what his treatment of her might be. Either way, she must part from her daughter forever. As Morgenstern writes,

> Morrison, in other words, depicts the plight of the powerless sovereign, the slave mother, who makes a decision concerning life and death while at the same time exploring the complex realm of maternal ethics. The challenge for Morrison's characters and readers is to disentangle the difficult experience of mothering and being mothered from the violence of racialized subjection. (Morgenstern 13)

Thus, Minha Mae's choice reflects the impossible choices Morrison's mothers have to make, in which maternal violence becomes the only expression of maternal love and responsibility allowed of these women. We might compare this moment to Sethe's attempt to explain to Beloved why she slit her throat, or to Sula defending her actions to Hannah; Morrison takes care to have these mothers who commit extreme acts of physical violence upon their children explain their actions to their children. Whether or not these reasons are accepted by the children actually seems to matter less; that Morrison allows Sethe, Eva, and here Minha Mae, the chance to explain these choices represents another way in which she imposes a lens of moral ambiguity and empathy upon her readers, challenging us to suspend our judgments of child murder and abandonment, and to see

them even as acts of mercy. However, Florens never hears this explanation, and so, never knowing her mother's reasons for sending her away, assumes it is because her mother does not love her.

In this way, the reoccurrence of unheard addresses, messages that never find their recipient, keep the characters from truly understanding one another in *A Mercy*. Throughout the novel, communication between characters, both spoken and written, often never make it to its intended audience; for example, as we have just discussed, Minha Mae's explanation to Florens (Morrison, *A Mercy* 195). Later in the novel, when Florens is sent to retrieve the blacksmith, the note which represents Florens' belonging to Rebekka is lost after the priest at Widow Ealing's home takes it (Morrison, *A Mercy* 132). Finally, Florens' defense of her actions and love to the blacksmith which she carves into the walls[12] of the attic likewise never reach him, and in fact, are written potentially after his death (Morrison, *A Mercy* 165). This occurs to her too late:

> I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you... Sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to... If you never read this, no one will. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 188)

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[12] This image of a young girl carving words into the attic wall seems to reference Charlotte Perkins Gillman's gothic short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892).

Just as Florens will never hear her mother's explanation for sending her away, so too will the blacksmith never hear, or read, Florens' explanation of her violent acts and her true feelings about him. As Morgenstern writes,

> The motif of failed address becomes, in Morrison's work, an allegory for subjecthood and relation... Morrison imagines an insistent signifying force, an address, a claim, that never becomes transparent communication but nevertheless has disruptive effects. Ultimately, the reader is unable to decide whether Florens' signifying is pointless, going nowhere... or whether these words will be radically disseminated (Morgenstern 14).

Furthermore, the narrative style of the novel in which Florens exchanges the story telling role with a third-person omniscient narrator situates the story as a piece of writing from Florens to her mother, explaining her story and inquiring after her mother's intentions in giving her away that goes unheard by its intended audience, her mother. In her last authorial words, Florens writes, "I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mae, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 189). By acknowledging that she will never receive her mother's message and then directly addressing her "Mae" who cannot read, Florens writes this message to eyes that will never see them. This reoccurring pattern of unheard addresses in *A Mercy* further substantiates the "orphanness" of all the characters, reflecting their inability to connect meaningfully with one another. Whereas Sethe at the end of *Beloved* cannot let go of her daughter, the absence of Mina Mae from Florens' life seems to follow her everywhere. More largely, this trope of unheard addresses speaks to Morrison's

authorship of this novel, and perhaps all authorship—the real possibility that in any novel, writing the words is only part of the power; the other essential piece lies in the audience's ability to hear that message and to consider it seriously. In this way, this trope of unheard addresses reflects both the inability of the characters to understand one another fully, and what is at stake for Morrison as the author of this novel. That these addresses could help to heal some of the violence done between the characters further emphasizes the pervasiveness of this cyclical[13] violence.

This narrative style, one which favors Florens' perspective, also informs our reading of these moments of violence and our assessment of Florens as an agent of them. Morrison's description of the violence which Florens may have enacted upon the blacksmith with the hammer happens very quickly, and is easy to miss:

> I have shock. Are you meaning I am nothing to you? That I have no consequence in your world? My face absent in blue water you find only to crush it? Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 167)

By dispersing the information about Florens' violent act, Morrison creates a sense of ambiguity which makes it difficult to figure out exactly what happened between Malaik and the blacksmith. All we later know from Willy and Scully is that Florens "was strangest" as they see her covered in blood (171). In this way, Morrison seems to employ her characteristic distance between the violent actor and the act of violence itself,

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[13] "Reading and writing are potentially reparative gestures that can also be hopeless, left behind, abandoned, and suspended in (or out of) time" (Morgenstern 21).

prompting her audience to suspend judgement before levying moral evaluation. Despite this, Florens differs from Sethe and Eva, and perhaps even her own mother as a violent agent, because her violence against Malaik and the blacksmith still seems less easily justified. Though we may sympathize with her, Florens' actions feel irrational and immature, more a reflection of uncontainable anger than a warranted act of justice. This shows that although Morrison pushes us to see violence as not an inherent moral wrong, she also does not defend it unequivocally. Florens seems to us an insecure, afraid, traumatized little girl who acts violently out of anger and revenge, for her own sake and not for the sake of her victims. This important distinction shows that momentarily suspending judgement does not necessitate condoning violence, but rather, that by waiting to evaluate Florens in the context of her story allows us to condemn her actions while empathizing with the circumstances of her life which produced them, particularly the emotional violence she experienced as a child because of her mother.

In the absence of her own mother, Lina steps in as a mother figure for Florens, reflecting the novel's exploration of non-traditional mother-child relationships that cannot be reflected by simpler definitions of motherhood. Almost immediately after Florens arrives, Lina develops a soft spot for her:

> Lina had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow. A frightened, long-necked child who did not speak for weeks but when she did her light, sing-song voice was lovely to hear. Somehow, some way, the child assuaged the tiny yet eternal yearning for home Lina once knew where everyone had anything, and no one had everything. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 70)

Lina and Florens share and do everything; they sleep together, do chores together, and look after each other, and both benefit from getting to participate in a mother-child relationship. Morrison writes, "Florens would sigh then, her head on Lina's shoulder and when sleep came the little girl's smile lingered. Mother hunger – to be one or have one – both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 73). This mother hunger is one we see in many of the mother-child relationships. Perhaps all of Morrison's mother-child relationships are driven by this desire to be or to have, a mother. In this way, Morrison explores mothering relationships that do not depend on biology, but from shared life experience, demonstrated care, and protection. Because all definitions of mothering and mother-child relationships are blurred, Lina becomes a mother-figure to Florens.

Just as Lina steps in as a surrogate mother for Florens, fulfilling this non-traditional mother role, Rebekka's inability to be a mother further reflects the complicated nature of motherhood in the novel. We learn that since she joined Jakob in the new world, Rebekka loses at least four infants to sickness and to the difficult conditions of the Maryland wilderness. When Patrician, the only daughter[14] Rebekka gives birth to and the only child who makes it out of infancy, dies after being kicked in the head by a horse, she struggles to recover part of herself:

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[14] In *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *A Mercy*, Morrison includes both sons and daughters in her investigation of maternal violence; however, she seems to favor the mother-daughter relationship in a way that speaks to Demetrakopoulos's analysis of the daughter as a future version of the mother, a chance to be and do things differently: "For Sethe, like Sophie, to kill her own daughter is to kill her own best self, to kill her best and self-gendered fantasy of the future. The act is like killing time itself, especially its redemptive gifts, which the daughter, as a potential mother, symbolizes" (53).

> It would have embarrassed her to mention personal sorrow in prayer; to be other than stalwart in grief; to let God know she was less than thankful for His watch. But she had delivered four healthy babies, watched three surrender at a different age to one or another illness, and then watched Patrician, her firstborn, who reached the age of five and provided a happiness Rebekka could not believe, lie in her arms for two days before dying from a broken crown. And then bury her twice (Morrison, *A Mercy* 92).

The loss of her children in this way, to give birth to five children and watch each of them die, understandably wounds her. Partially, Jacob hopes that Florens will fill this child role for Rebekka: "But thinking also, perhaps Rebekka would welcome a child around the place. This one here... appeared to be about the same age as Patrician, and if she got kicked in the head by a mare, the loss would not rock Rebekka so" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 31). Rebekka shares Lina's mother-hunger, that desire to be a mother, and yet for reasons that feel cosmic and larger than her, her children die, one after the other[15].

Finally, Sorrow's motherhood at the end of the novel presents a more optimistic view of motherhood and further prompts questions about the boundaries of maternal possession, in this age and in our own. Soon after Florens first comes to the Vaark property, the women discover that Sorrow is pregnant. Either because that child is still born or because Lina worries that this baby would be too difficult for Rebekka to be

[15] I wonder if part of our concern about Rebekka might pertain to why she does not take on a greater maternal role in Florens' life like Lina. That Jacob intended this for her is stated explicitly. Not that any child could necessarily replace the ones she has lost, but Florens presents Rebekka with the opportunity to be the mother she so hungers for. Why does she refuse then? The answer seems to have mostly to do with Florens' skin tone and her status as an enslaved person, one that Rebekka technically "owns." The irony illuminated by the wilderness of *A Mercy*'s setting points to the absurdity of abiding by these unfounded and unjust social dictums within a land with no real laws and without the judgments of large-scale society.

around, the child is placed in the river and Sorrow struggles to see the child's face under the water (Morrison, *A Mercy* 145). Perhaps the greatest testament to the power of mother hunger is when Sorrow gives birth to a child of her own. Morrison reveals in bits and pieces that Sorrow's untethered mental state is the result of a past involving abuse and sexual assault. The moment she begins to heal and her imaginary friend disappears occurs when she gives birth to a child of her own, likely the product of a consensual sexual interaction with the blacksmith. So, Morrison writes:

> Twin was gone, traceless and unmissed by the only person who knew her. Sorrow's wandering stopped too. Now she attended routine duties, organizing them around her infant's needs, impervious to the complaints of others. She had looked into her daughter's eyes; saw in them the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by-the-lee. 'I am your mother,' she said. 'My name is Complete.' (Morrison, *A Mercy* 158)

A character isolated by mental disorder, literally defined by her "sorrow," finds sanity and completeness in the birth of her own[16] child. Like Sethe's mother, who kept the child which came from her only consensual sexual interaction, this choice likewise represents an act of autonomy in an otherwise unfree life. The imaginary friend who provokes and haunts Sorrow throughout the novel, sort of in the way the ghost of Beloved haunts Sethe, is in a sense replaced by Sorrow's child.

[16] There exists much debate about what Morrison's feeling about motherhood is precisely. Without getting too deep into that discussion, I do think this moment with Sorrow and her baby presents the possibility of motherhood as a thing which might sincerely bring joy to a woman's life, by giving her something else to love and pour attention into, that might even save her life.

In conclusion, because *A Mercy* sets out to examine the ideas that become concrete law, these concepts of justice, right action, and motherhood are likewise brought into question. Through the pattern of violence traced from Minha Mae through Florens and outward to the blacksmith, Morrison shows that violence is a learned trait, one that appears even in the wilderness of colonial America. This cycle also shows that, like in Sula, emotional violence can be just as detrimental to a child as physical violence. Like in *Beloved* and in *Sula*, Morrison uses absences and distance in her narration of the story to impose a lens of understanding on her reader, one which prompts us to suspend our judgements of characters who commit violent actions, to separate the actors from their acts, and to consider each of these within a larger story and family lineage. Despite this, Morrison shows through Florens that not all violent actors and actions are permissible, no matter how sympathetic we may come to feel for those who hurt others. In *A Mercy*, Morrison's exploration of motherhood like other important ideas in the novel, defy the definitions and boundaries we typically attribute to them; Lina, for example, fills a mothering role in Florens' life despite not being her biological mother. Rebekka, on the other hand, seems to be denied the opportunity to mother, despite her attempts to carry her own children, while Sorrow, who spends most of the novel trying to mentally recover from the array of abuse implied in her backstory, finds meaning, peace, and a newfound sense of identity in being a mother. In this way, Morrison in *A Mercy* expands upon our traditional expectations of what a mother is and how she ought to act, especially the way in which acts of violence may constitute acts of love.

VIII. Conclusion: "The only grace you can have is the grace you can imagine" (Morrison, *Beloved* 88).

In her novels *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *A Mercy*, Morrison weaves this pattern of violence into the relationships between mothers and their children. Though these acts of violence cause harm and bear repercussions in the lives of their children, grandchildren, and those outside of these families, Morrison invites her audience to see how these acts of violence might also serve as expressions of motherlove, as a manifestation of a mother's profound care for her children. The difficult choices Morrison's mothers make also represent resistance against the white Western moral framework which has been employed against black women to deny them both responsibility for their children and the right to parent them fully. In this way, the presence of maternal violence in these novels challenges Morrison's audience to question the systems of morality we are tempted to hold these women to, and to consider the way these moral frameworks have been weaponized by racist and sexist institutions throughout US history. By pushing her reader to suspend moral readings of these characters, Morrison invites her audience instead to empathize with these mothers whose impossible choices are often made between the lesser of two evils.

In writing this paper, I find myself having to confront my own instinct to moralize a story, to glean some sort of ethical lesson from the stories I read. That reading literature constitutes an exercise in active empathy, in trying to see the world from someone else's place in the world, might also mean not holding them to our own ideas of what is right and wrong seems simple enough. And yet, the impulse to moralize runs deep. What I think is important to take away from our reading of Morrison's violent women is not that

morality is wrong or that we should reject moral systems altogether, but rather an awareness of our participation in these systems and a willingness to occasionally step outside of them. In what ways are my moral beliefs a product of my upbringing and of my relationships with the people who raised me? How is my conception of morality shaped by my place within larger historical, social, and political institutions, in ways that I am not always conscious of? What are my moral responsibilities and to whom are they tied? These are the sort of moral and personal questions I carry with me as I leave behind Morrison's mothers and children.

Morrison's challenge to step outside our moral impulses, to me, is captured succinctly and beautifully by Baby Suggs' central preaching to the folks in the clearing:

> 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, *Beloved* 103)

It is this practice of imagining grace for others, even when their actions seem to conflict with our own beliefs and moral impulses, which grounds Morrison's story-telling[17] and which she invites her reader to join her in.

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[17] Krumholz agrees: "Baby Suggs represents an epistemological and discursive philosophy that shapes Morrison's work, in which morality is not preset in black and white categories of good and evil; "good" or "evil" spring from the methods of categorizing and judging, of understanding and distributing knowledge" (Krumholz 398).

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