




Maternal Body and Voice

in Toni Morrison,
Bobbie Ann Mason,
and Lee Smith

Paula Gallant Eckard



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藏书章

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To my children, from whom I have learned so much

*And to my granddaughter, Julianna Grace,
from whom I hope to learn even more*

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PREFACE

This study of maternal experience in selected novels by Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith has been a lifetime in the making. Multiple experiences, both personal and professional, have led to this study. Spanning many years of my life, they have shaped my attitudes towards childbearing and motherhood in profound, often contradictory ways.

For the most part, I grew up associating maternity with blood, anger, and silence. My mother was pregnant several times during my childhood and adolescence, but she rarely spoke of the pregnancies, childbirths, or the many miscarriages she had. Expressing little emotion, she said few words about the losses she endured. I nonetheless sensed within her a raw mixture of grief and anger. One experience more than any other reveals the disturbing elements I came to associate with motherhood. Late one night when I was about fifteen, I got out of bed to check on my pregnant mother, who had been cramping and bleeding hours before, only to find her missing and my aunt on her knees washing bloody sheets in the bathtub. Standing in the doorway, I asked what happened, but my aunt gave me no response. She continued her work and I watched as a ring of blood formed on the white enamel walls of the tub, the water deepening in color. Her silence confused and angered me, but thankfully I was old enough to discern what had taken place. As I crept back to bed, I figured out that my mother had been taken to the hospital to be treated for yet another miscarriage. But, given the copious amount of blood I had seen, I was not sure if she would be all right this time. A few days later, my mother returned home pale and silent. I searched her face for the sorrow I knew had to be there, but I could not locate any. Her tense, contracted body resonated with fury instead. Without any words spoken, I knew that she was angry with herself, my father, and a world that expected pain and

sacrifice from women. I felt guilty for being one of the children that had lived.

The images and emotions of that night have stayed with me through the years. My mother's wasted blood still pulses through my thoughts, my life, and perhaps my writing as well. I experience wrenching dreams of childbirth in which I sometimes give birth to a beautiful, perfect daughter. But always, with overwhelming sadness, I realize she is not mine, and I have to give her back. In other dreams, I rock grotesque babies, born without eyes, mouths, or even bodies, as they sleep in cradles of blood. Despite the nightmarish nature of these reminders, the silences surrounding my mother's losses have disturbed me more. Like the lost children, these silences have created voids that contain greater anguish than my dreams. Throughout my life, I have struggled with these empty spaces, seeking ways to understand them, to fill them, to eradicate them.

For quite different reasons, I associate the maternal experiences of my grandmothers with silence as well. Although my grandmothers bore twenty children, five girls and five boys each, their maternal stories have eluded me. My paternal grandmother died before I was three; my maternal grandmother lived three thousand miles away in Canada and I rarely saw her. I know, however, that both grandmothers gave voice to their thoughts, feelings, and experiences through writing. My father's mother, Anna Lee Pennigar Gallant, wrote poetry; my mother's mother, Hulda Elizabeth Wicklund Humbke, maintained a diary almost daily throughout her life. As a child, my maternal grandmother emigrated from Sweden with her family in the late 1800s to settle in western Canada. Marrying at sixteen, she and my German grandfather carved out a long life together on the wild, expansive prairies of Alberta, surviving blizzards, exhausting farmwork, and other hardships that our modern sensibilities cannot comprehend. When my grandmother died twenty-five years ago at the age of eighty-seven, she left behind over 130 direct descendants—children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren.

I regret never hearing my grandmothers' stories for myself. What little I know about them has come to me second- and thirdhand from other family members. Sometimes, in my imaginings, I try to visualize their lives and experiences as mothers. I strain to hear their voices, misplaced somewhere in memory. However, if I listen carefully in dreams or dur-

ing quiet moments of the day, I can recall my Grandmother Gallant's slurred speech as she fussed over me from her wheelchair, cruelly confined by a paralyzing stroke and a leg amputation. Or, when I talk to my mother on the telephone, I can hear traces of my Grandma Humbke's warm Swedish laughter in her voice, reaching through time and space much as it did when I was young. Before modern telecommunication and inexpensive long distance, my mother and I would call my grandmother in Canada every few months, three female voices traveling back and forth along the thousands of miles of wire between us to be briefly linked together. Later, my younger sisters, Candice and Diana, joined in these conversations, but their voices drowned out the sound of my grandmother's voice, pushing it farther away and eventually into memory.

While personal associations involving the maternal body and voice have fueled this literary study, more recent professional experiences have contributed to its development. Before I began teaching English and pursuing graduate work in that area, I spent many years working as a registered nurse and certified childbirth educator, careers that no doubt stem from the experiences described earlier. In these capacities, I came into an intense, firsthand understanding of maternal experience. I taught more than a thousand expectant mothers and attended many births, including those experienced by my sisters, close friends, and the women in my classes. During this time, I gave birth to three children and lost another child through miscarriage. Each of these experiences left me with an increased knowledge of the maternal body, a renewed sense of awe concerning the power it contains, and a sharper awareness of the challenges imposed by pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. I also acquired a richer understanding of the diverse nature of women's experiences and the many complex factors affecting maternity. I observed the importance that family, culture, economics, and personal attitudes assume in shaping women's experiences of their bodies and their maternal roles. I saw the damage that fear and ignorance wreaked and the difference that support and education could make. No two women, I discovered, go through pregnancy, childbirth, breast-feeding, and motherhood in quite the same ways. Each woman effectively creates her own "herstory," a maternal history and set of stories that are uniquely hers.

Perhaps it is their concern for "herstory" that draws me most to the works of Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith and has

led me to include them in this study. These writers powerfully foreground maternal experience in their novels and give serious, focused attention to the body and voice of the mother. They create female characters of different ages, cultural backgrounds, and life situations, thus depicting an unusual variety of maternal experiences. Morrison, Mason, and Smith also portray the impact of patriarchal history and thought on the mother's body and voice. They show that while silence is often imposed upon the maternal, a rich consciousness nonetheless exists within many of the mothers they create. Moreover, all three writers pull together elements of realism, metaphor, language, and culture that give voice and complex meaning to motherhood. For these reasons, their novels help me to understand maternal experience in ways my previous experiences did not allow. These writers not only remove the silences surrounding the maternal in a literary sense, but also speak with truth about the experiences of many women, including my own. Their works have prompted me to reexamine my own experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. I have realized that, unlike my mother, I suffered little fear, pain, or loss of blood during the births of my three sons. Even the miscarriage I had was a simple, uncomplicated event. Overall, my experiences in childbearing have proven to be quite different from my mother's. Hers contained enough blood and pain for the both of us.

To conclude my discussion of the foundation for this study, I wish to describe a recent incident that revealed much to me about maternity and the development of the female voice. A year or so ago, my mother gave me a small black notebook in which she had recorded the events of my first year of life. She detailed every new food, new tooth, and new accomplishment. She described every rash and fever. She wrote about all the friends and gushing relatives who came to visit me. Strangely, she did not write about these things from her perspective, but from mine. She discarded her own voice and imagined her daughter's instead. She gave me words when language was still beyond my grasp, empowering me to speak. I hope this study will prove that her efforts were not in vain and that I have successfully given voice to the mother's experience in return.

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ABBREVIATIONS

I have adopted the following abbreviations to identify the literary works quoted from in this study:

Toni Morrison

BEL *Beloved*
BLU *The Bluest Eye*
SUL *Sula*

Bobbie Ann Mason

CS *Clear Springs*
FC *Feather Crowns*
IC *In Country*
SHI *Shiloh and Other Stories*
SL *Spence + Lila*

Lee Smith

FTL *Fair and Tender Ladies*
OH *Oral History*
SG *Saving Grace*

MATERNAL

BODY *and* VOICE

in TONI MORRISON,

BOBBIE ANN MASON,

and LEE SMITH

Introduction

“Mothers don’t write, they are written.” As these words suggest, motherhood and maternal experience have been largely defined and “written” by other forces. Religion, art, medicine, psychoanalysis, and other bastions of patriarchal power have objectified the maternal and disregarded female subjectivity. Indeed, throughout the history of western culture and literature, maternal perspectives have been ignored and the mother’s voice silenced. Even early feminist theorists sorely neglected maternal subjectivity, for, as Maureen Reddy points out, “feminism was largely a daughter’s critique,” which viewed mothers and motherhood with suspicion.¹

Generally speaking, maternal subjectivity—the presentation of pregnancy, childbirth, and the experience of motherhood from the mother’s perspective—has not been well represented in written culture. Reddy and Brenda Daly assert that “in women’s accounts of motherhood, maternal perspectives are strangely absent,” with daughters’ voices being the ones usually heard “in both literary and theoretical texts about mothers, mothering, and motherhood, even in those written by feminists who are mothers.” Moreover, they remind us that childbirth has often been depicted in fiction “as metaphor, not as narrated experience” told by the mother.² This has led to a further de-

1. Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Writing and Motherhood,” 356; Maureen Reddy, “Motherhood, Knowledge, and Power,” 81.

2. Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy, introduction to *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*, 1, 4.

valuing of maternal experience and has diminished maternal subjectivity within the culture.

In recent literary and theoretical texts, however, more substantial attention has been given to motherhood and to the physical, psychological, social, and cultural dynamics affecting the maternal experience. Important late-twentieth-century writers of fiction such as Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith scrutinize these dynamics closely, emphasizing particularly how they affect the body and the voice of the mother. By employing such a focus, these writers lessen the objectification the maternal has received and restore a rich subjectivity that foregrounds the mother's perspective and experience. Moreover, their fiction reflects a deep concern for history and culture and a woman's experience of these forces. They challenge the traditional representations of black and white motherhood that have appeared in southern literature and society and instead render complex portrayals of motherhood that defy cultural stereotypes.

In this study I will examine how maternal experience and the body and voice of the mother are depicted in selected works by these writers: Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Beloved* (1987); Mason's *In Country* (1985), *Spence + Lila* (1988), and *Feather Crowns* (1993); and Smith's *Oral History* (1983), *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), and *Saving Grace* (1995). Female experiences in these works, which are highly individualized, take place in different cultural and geographic settings. Although their experiences of life and motherhood may differ significantly, African American and white southern women have an intertwined historical legacy and share a common ground in the transforming experience of maternity. The novels of Morrison, Mason, and Smith reflect this shared history and experience, as well as ambivalent connections to the South. Even when the novels move outside the South, as in Morrison's case, the region continues to exert a strong influence in the creation of the maternal. Time, place, and motherhood come together in compelling ways, seriously affecting the body and voice of the mother in the process.

The extraordinary sense of place that all three writers create in their works no doubt stems from the personal connections each has to a specific geographic region. Born in 1931, Toni Morrison grew up in Lorain, Ohio, leaving there at age seventeen to attend Howard University in Washington, D.C. Although she claims never to have "felt like an

American or an Ohioan or even a Lorainite," she nonetheless evokes a strong sense of place in her novels, one that is suggestive of the small-town life she experienced while growing up. The Ohio communities that Morrison depicts in such novels as *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved* have autobiographical origins that contribute substantially to "the details, the feeling, the mood" of the places she creates in her fiction. She admits to a tendency to focus on neighborhoods and communities, which in her own life provided "life-giving, very, very strong sustenance."

According to Morrison, black neighborhoods emphasized cohesiveness and responsibility. She describes how they took care of people in need and generally "meddled in your lives a lot." The Ohio towns and communities she portrays in her fiction assume these functions; however, they are significant for other reasons, primarily their proximity to the South. Morrison points out that Ohio is "an interesting state from the point of view of black people": it borders the southern state of Kentucky, and "at its northern tip is Canada."³ Certainly, the South and its slaveholding past cast troubling shadows over the lives of Morrison's characters in the fictional Ohio towns she creates. As her novels show, geography and history impose terrific burdens that span multiple generations. For many of Morrison's characters, particularly mothers, the weight is crushing.

Born in 1940, Bobbie Ann Mason hails from western Kentucky, whose small towns and rural landscapes provide the settings for her short stories and novels. Rather than examining the South's troubled past, she explores the cultural changes at work in the contemporary South of the late twentieth century. The Kentucky towns and farms in her novels are in a state of flux, dramatically altered by the rise of suburban neighborhoods, shopping malls, and fast-food restaurants. Virginia Smith sees Mason's use of her home region in her fiction "as a metaphor for profound shifts in the contemporary social terrain and for a transient American culture."⁴ Unlike Morrison's characters, who must bear the burdens of the past, Mason's have difficulty contending with the present. They experience tumultuous changes in their person-

3. Quoted in Robert Stepto, "Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," 10-12.

4. Virginia Smith, "Between the Lines: Contemporary Southern Women Writers Gail Godwin, Bobbie Ann Mason, Lisa Alther, and Lee Smith," 134.

al lives—dysfunctional families, divorce, unemployment, illness—as their once-rural society gives way to mass culture. In many instances, the traditional moorings of family and community are lost, while the past seems irrelevant and largely unknown.

For Mason's female characters, these changes strike at the core of their identity as wives and mothers. Some are left perplexed and confused, unsure how to respond to the changes imposed upon them. Others adapt and survive. Whatever the case, Mason believes that her characters communicate "the familiarity of common experience" and that "their language grows out of cohesive culture."⁵ Despite the personal upheavals endured by her characters and the social and economic changes affecting their communities, Mason's fiction suggests that an inherent cultural stability exists. Paradoxically, this furnishes a foundation for her characters, enabling them to adapt to change and new cultural elements more easily than one might suppose.

Like Morrison and Mason, Lee Smith draws upon her roots to create a sense of place in her fiction and to undergird the lives and experiences of her characters. Born in 1944, Smith grew up in the mountains of western Virginia in the mining town of Grundy. The Appalachian region provides the setting for several of her novels, including *Oral History*, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and *Saving Grace*. Harriet Buchanan observes that Smith, like Mason, writes about "people, times, and places with warmth, humor, and ironic detachment."⁶ At the same time, Smith is deeply concerned with cultural change and its effect on individuals and communities. Her female characters, immersed in mountain traditions and culture, find themselves in confrontation with harsh Appalachian realities that make survival difficult at best. Change is often thrust upon them, leaving them with divided loyalties, a pervasive restlessness, an ambivalence towards the past, and a discomfort with the present.

Patriarchal expectations also define the existence of Smith's mountain women. Burdened by responsibility and guilt, they live out hard lives taking care of others, often subjugating their own needs, desires, and ambitions in the process. Smith herself sees such roles and expect-

5. Quoted in Dorothy Combs Hill, "An Interview with Bobbie Ann Mason," 105.

6. Harriet Buchanan, "Lee Smith: The Storyteller's Voice," 324.

tations as "very limiting and very rigid." She declares: "Guilt is the great disease of Southern women. Just free-floating guilt that will attach to anything."⁷ The expectations imposed by patriarchal culture and the guilt internalized by her female characters form complex layers of oppression that silence the maternal and limit self-actualization for women.

Given the cultural concerns inherent in the novels of Morrison, Mason, and Smith and the importance each writer places on time and place in defining female experience, an examination of historical perspectives affecting both black and white mothers is crucial. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Jacqueline Jones, Deborah White, Sally McMillen, Judith Leavitt, and others provide the historical and cultural grounding of motherhood vital to this study. Their investigations into social, medical, and historical areas demonstrate how deeply interwoven motherhood is with the cultural fabric of the United States. The work of these scholars moreover reveals the crushing impact of patriarchal thought on the lives of both black and white mothers in the Old South. Their research validates and illuminates the realities of maternal experience depicted in the novels discussed here.

Certain theoretical perspectives are equally imperative in discussing motherhood in the works of Morrison, Mason, and Smith. I will use both a cultural model of feminist criticism and a "maternalist" approach to examine maternal experience and the body and voice of the mother in the novels selected for this study. According to feminist theorist Elaine Showalter, a cultural model of feminist criticism "incorporates ideas about woman's body, language, and psyche, but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur." As Showalter makes clear, a woman's conceptualization of her body and reproductive function is "intricately linked" to the cultural environment. Moreover, a feminist theory of culture acknowledges differences among women as writers and insists that factors of race, class, history, and nationality are as important literary determinants as gender. Showalter asserts that women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole "that binds women writers to each other over time and space."⁸ Her

7. Quoted in Danyne Romine Powell, *Parting the Curtains: Interviews with Southern Writers*, 294.

8. Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," 27.

ideas about the unifying effects of women's experiences hold special import for this study.

Similarly, Sara Ruddick, in her essay "Maternal Thinking," stresses the intersections and divergences in women's experiences of motherhood. Recognizing that such factors as class, ethnicity, and geographical and historical settings affect maternity, she states: "Maternal practice responds to the historical reality of a biological child in a particular social world." Ruddick acknowledges that some aspects of mothering are "invariant and nearly unchangeable," while others, "though changeable, are nearly universal."⁹ Morrison, Mason, and Smith illustrate the very realities that Ruddick describes. Their novels show significant divergences in the construction of motherhood and maternal experience—divergences that are profoundly shaped by differences in race, class, culture, and geographic region. However, enough intersections exist that I can "bind" these writers together to show how maternity serves as a vital substructure in their works and thus contributes to a collective female literary experience.

The "maternalist" approach that I wish to include is a mode of feminist criticism that, according to Naomi Schor, is "concerned with identifying the productions of the female imagination, charting female psychosexual development, psychoanalyzing feminine desire, making once again audible a muffled or silenced maternal voice."¹⁰ In order to examine these areas in the novels of Morrison, Mason, and Smith, I will use certain facets of the linguistic and psychoanalytic theories of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray as they pertain to the maternal body and language. Specifically, Kristeva's ideas concerning the fluidity of "women's time"; maternal sexual pleasure or *jouissance* of the female body; and the importance of the womblike semiotic chora, the prelinguistic realm underlying symbolic discourse, aptly pertain to the fiction of all three writers. Similarly, Cixous's and Irigaray's emphasis on the female morphology of language and the primacy of the mother in the development and use of language has considerable relevance in my study. The theories of Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray richly illuminate the connections that Morrison, Mason, and Smith make among lan-

guage, creativity, and the maternal body in their fiction. Moreover, the concern that Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray express about the impact of a masculine, paternal order of culture on female identity is explored in the fictional works chosen for this study. Indeed, Morrison, Mason, and Smith share a common concern about the impact of patriarchal culture on the body and voice of the mother, something their novels powerfully reflect.

I believe it will also be helpful to incorporate the ideas of other feminist theorists into the examination of individual novels. For example, the writings of Barbara Christian and Karla F. C. Holloway, particularly their discussions of the mythic and spiritual dimensions contained in the works of black women writers, have considerable bearing on Morrison's novels and may have applicability to the works of Mason and Smith—both white writers—as well. The thoughts of Tillie Olsen and Elaine Orr on the demanding realities of women's lives and the impact of sex roles on women's creativity and expression help illuminate the lives of some of the fictional mothers studied here. In another example, the theories of Adrienne Rich and Jane Gallop on the vital connections between the female body and the development of feminine thought will prove useful in examining Mason's *Spence + Lila*. Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's discussion of women, madness, and writing in their important work *The Madwoman in the Attic* has implications for Ivy Rowe in Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies* regarding her sexual maturation and the development of her writerly voice. Ideas posited by feminist theologians Carol Ochs and Mary Daly about the impact of patriarchal religion on female identity will enhance my study of Smith's *Saving Grace*, a novel that creates disturbing connections between maternal experience and Christianity. Annis Pratt's discussion of female spiritual quests in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* further illuminates the spiritual journey that Smith's protagonist takes in *Saving Grace* to resolve conflicts between the matriarchal and patriarchal elements undergirding her life.

I wish to reiterate that my primary objective is to examine closely how Morrison, Mason, and Smith portray maternal experience and depict the body and voice of the mother in selected novels. I will, however, address the cross-cultural connections that exist among their works. Despite racial and cultural differences, striking similarities can

9. Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," 214–15.

10. Naomi Schor, "Feminist and Gender Studies," 270.

be found in the renderings of the maternal in the fiction of these writers. While all three closely examine the myths and realities of motherhood and the impact of these on the maternal body and voice, their works reflect other commonalities as well. For example, Morrison's *Beloved* and Mason's *Feather Crowns*, both of which are historically grounded, emphasize the commodification of motherhood and the female body. Additionally, in both *Beloved* and Mason's *Spence + Lila*, the female breast and breast-feeding serve as powerful symbols of maternal experience. Smith, like Morrison, blends realism and magic to construct events, settings, and elements of the maternal. Both intertwine ghostly presences and other phenomena with the maternal experiences of their characters. And, like Mason, Smith is concerned with the rapidly changing southern landscape in the modern world and the impact of cultural change on women's lives and their experiences of motherhood.

Given my thematic focus, I think it is important to also acknowledge that Morrison, Mason, and Smith effectively engage in a kind of "maternal thinking," or what Ruddick terms "the *thought* that has developed from mothering." Ruddick describes the basis of this thinking as something that extends quite beyond the maternal passions of the heart and envelops instead "the intellectual capacities [the mother] develops, the judgments she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, the values she affirms." It is an intellectual engagement that involves "a unity of reflection, judgment, and emotion."¹¹ Morrison, Mason, and Smith achieve this kind of unity in their portrayal of maternity and the mother's experience. In so doing, they correct the neglect and ambivalence that has been associated with the subject of maternity in literature. In their novels, they conduct honest, intense, and direct assessments of the maternal experience, something that many women writers have avoided or failed to do. This is no minor accomplishment, as the difficulty in rendering the mother's experience is complex and daunting.

According to Marianne Hirsch, the difficulty associated with the depiction of maternal experience in women's literature is rooted in four major areas. First, since motherhood is largely a patriarchal construc-

tion, women identify their mothers with victimization and martyrdom. Second, *feminist writings*, which place a high value on women's control of their bodies and lives, reflect a discomfort with the vulnerability and lack of control associated with motherhood. In feminist views, maternity often forces a state of dependency on women—a dependency on the medical establishment, on men who "are involved in the production and rearing of children," on society and other women, and "on the children themselves." The creative image of giving birth to oneself pervades feminist writing, but Hirsch questions what happens to "actual" mothers and children when "women figuratively become their own 'mothers.'" She argues that it is easier to exclude the rendering of maternal consciousness and experience because so much of it is beyond reason and control. A third reason Hirsch advances for the neglect of maternal experience in literature is the pervasive fear and discomfort with the female body that both feminist and nonfeminist women experience. Hirsch notes that most areas of feminist analysis have resisted using biology to address female experience, but, as she ironically observes, "Nothing entangles women more firmly in their bodies than pregnancy, birth, lactation, miscarriage, or the inability to conceive."

Lastly, in Hirsch's estimation, feminist ambivalence about power, authority, and anger cause a separation between feminist and maternal discourse. Much feminist theoretical writing in the United States "is permeated with fears of maternal power and with anger at maternal powerlessness." To eradicate these fears and projections, Hirsch calls for feminist theorists to begin "listening to the stories that mothers have to tell, and . . . creating the space in which mothers might articulate those stories."¹² Certainly Morrison, Mason, and Smith have created that space within their texts. In doing so, these writers have done much to confront the discomfort and fear connected with maternity. They challenge patriarchal structures and attitudes and establish a discourse in which the mother's body, language, and experiences are fundamental. In depicting maternal experience, each writer also honors the integrity of individual experiences and the cultures from which they emanate.

11. Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," 213–14.

12. Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, 165–67.

Morrison, Mason, and Smith reveal that the maternal is a powerful force that shapes human lives and communities and is a critical determinant in the development of female voice and identity. By centering maternal experience so strongly in their novels, these writers establish the primacy of the mother and obviate the neglect to which motherhood and the maternal perspective have been subjected.

1

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Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on Motherhood

Throughout human history, motherhood has been fraught with contradictions, confusing dualities, and power struggles. Patriarchal constructions of women have fueled the development of conflicting ideas about mothers and maternal experience. The body and voice of the mother have suffered particular oppression. In *Of Woman Born*, feminist writer Adrienne Rich explains how on one hand the female body has been seen as "impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination; 'the devil's gateway.'" At the same time, the woman as mother is deemed "beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing." Indeed, the female body is "a field of contradictions," a space that Rich considers to be "invested with both power, and an acute vulnerability." She contends that the female body "is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" and that motherhood is "'sacred' so long as its offspring are 'legitimate'—that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother."¹

Rich's observations have particular relevance for the study of southern motherhood and for the fictional works of Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith considered in this study. Rich's description of the patriarchal construction of women in *Of Woman Born* is also an apt description of the patriarchal structures that undergirded the Old South and that contributed significantly to the suffering and anguish experienced by black and white southern mothers of the era. Childbearing

1. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 13, 73, 31, 20.

was a critical event in the lives of many of these women. Their experiences had considerable impact on shaping the attitudes, beliefs, and practices that affect maternal roles today. Unquestionably, the realities of antebellum motherhood figure significantly in the cultural psyche of the South. They help to explain why maternity functions as such a powerful force in the fiction of Morrison, Mason, and Smith. All three writers infuse the maternal experiences of their characters with compelling realities that are deeply rooted in time and place. Despite their racial differences, their works reveal the enormous impact that southern history and culture have had on women's lives. With the exception of Morrison's *Beloved* and Mason's *Feather Crowns*, the fictional works discussed in this study are largely grounded in the twentieth century. However, given the tremendous impact of the past within all of the texts, a historical examination of nineteenth-century southern motherhood is necessary in order to fully understand each writer's treatment of motherhood and the importance ascribed to the maternal body and voice.

Historically speaking, both black and white women were very much "written" by the patriarchal forces of the Old South. Their lives and roles were clearly defined for them in the plantation system, and it was in the realm of sexuality and motherhood that the patriarchy delivered the most oppression. Women's bodies were the terrain upon which the southern patriarchy was erected. Black and white women endured repeated childbearing expressly for the benefit and support of the patriarchy. Their progeny renewed white southern families on one hand and the system of slavery on the other. Slavery, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has noted, shaped the experiences of all women in the Old South, affecting the domestic and childbearing roles of both black and white women. The relationship between mistress and slave was often a complex and strained one. Fox-Genovese asserts that, despite the "shared experience of life in rural households under the domination of men," black and white southern women were "deeply divided" by race and class. Ironically, though their lives intersected intimately and daily within the plantation household, no genuine sisterhood resulted. They were bound together primarily "by their specific and different relations" to the household's master.²

2. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, 38, 43, 101.

In her literary study of black and white women of the Old South, Minrose Gwin observes that white women, "fictional or actual, writers or subjects," failed to recognize the humanity of their black counterparts, seeing them only "as a color, as servants, as children, as adjuncts, as sexual competition, as dark sides of their own sexual selves—as black Other." White women resented the forced sexuality of black women, who were "to be used as vessels of sexual pleasure or to breed new property." Gwin believes that the virgin-whore dichotomy imposed on white and black women greatly affected their images of themselves and of each other. In particular, white southern women internalized the prevailing attitudes about themselves as women on pedestals, "emblem[s] of chastity and powerlessness," and proceeded to function as "faithful standard-bearers of the patriarchy and its racial constructs."³

In her nineteenth-century diary depicting antebellum life and politics, Mary Boykin Chesnut, a noted antebellum author, links sexuality, slavery, and the southern patriarchy. Her observations support Gwin's theory that white southern women reinforced the racial and gender attitudes of their fathers and husbands. Disturbed by the frequent sexual relationships between white men and female slaves and by white women's passive complicity in the matter, Chesnut laments: "God forgive us, but ours is a *monstrous* system. . . . Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children—and every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds, or pretends so to think."⁴ Chesnut's words illustrate the self-serving attitude of denial that permeated southern thought about the complicated familial relationships that emerged under slavery. Moreover, her writing reveals the peculiar and strained relationship that resulted between black and white women because of the sexual proclivities of the southern patriarchy.

Despite the divisiveness that existed between black and white women of the Old South, they nonetheless shared some common ground in their experience of motherhood. In *Motherhood in the Old South*, a

3. Minrose Gwin, *Black and White Women of the Old South: The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature*, 4–5.

4. Mary Boykin Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, 29.

historical study of antebellum motherhood, Sally McMillen shows how the rituals of childbirth "united black and white women, dissolving for a moment racial barriers."⁵ This is evident in Morrison's *Beloved* when Amy Denver, a white indentured servant, assists the slave Sethe in childbirth when their paths intersect during their respective flights to freedom. Similarly, Mittens Dowdy, a black mother with a nursing baby of her own, serves as a wet nurse to help Christie Wheeler feed her newborn quintuplets in Mason's *Feather Crowns*. In both novels, racial barriers are removed as black and white women work together in the cooperative experience of childbearing and infant feeding.

Citing numerous antebellum letters and diaries by white southern women of privileged status, McMillen provides an effective argument against Gwin's assertion that white women did not recognize the humanity of their black counterparts. McMillen's study indicates that some white southern mothers felt a clear appreciation for the black midwives who assisted them in childbirth. They were also grateful to the black wet nurses who fed their infants when they were unable to breast-feed due to illness or an inadequate milk supply.⁶ McMillen's study reaffirms the common ground between black and white women. She points out that, although their stations in life and their individual experiences differed greatly, black and white women shared many of the same dangers and threats to their lives as well as the potential loss of children. Fear, anguish, and powerlessness pervaded the maternal experience for many mothers. Motherhood was a central and compelling experience in the lives of both black and white women of the South, one that was profoundly shaped by the patriarchy in which they lived.

The antebellum patriarchy wielded a great deal of power over women's lives. Its construction of motherhood further enmeshed maternity into the fabric of southern culture. As McMillen makes clear, the Old South prided itself on well-defined gender roles, with white southern men of privileged class holding "the upper hand in both the public and the domestic spheres." Such patriarchal structure "was essential to maintaining order in a rural, slave-owning society." Southern men glorified the maternal role and believed that childbearing and childrear-

5. Sally McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing*, 57.

6. See McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 70–72, 111–12, and 124–29, for a discussion of the role of slave women as midwives and wet nurses.

ing were central to a woman's existence. Motherhood was deemed a "sacred occupation," one that the South celebrated and exalted. Women embraced these beliefs as strongly as their husbands did, often treating childless women with scorn and pity. Chesnut, herself childless, describes in her diary how she came to the defense of a woman without children. She tells a group of reproachful women that Mrs. Browne "was childless now, but that she had lost three children." Having elicited the women's sympathy for Mrs. Browne, Chesnut shrewdly observes, "Women have such a contempt for a childless wife." Later in her diary, however, Chesnut more wistfully comments, "Women need maternity to bring out their best and true loveliness." She condemns the scorn directed at childless women and at the same time acknowledges how important maternity is to female identity, an importance vigorously reinforced by the southern patriarchy.⁷

Nineteenth-century white southern families were larger than the national norm, since there were few social or economic constraints to limit fertility. Nationally, family size fell from 7.04 children per woman of childbearing age in 1800 to 5.4 in 1850, but southern families remained large throughout much of the period, with eight to twelve children not unusual. Pregnancy rates were actually higher than official statistics indicated, since census figures did not reflect miscarriages, stillbirths, or early infant deaths. The figures also did not account for the fact that some women did not marry or bear children. One explanation for the large size of southern families may lie in the fact that privileged white southern women often married relatively young, thus increasing their childbearing years and possibly their number of pregnancies. Moreover, a large family was considered a reflection of the husband's masculinity, as well as "the vigor of the patriarchy, the importance of the southern family, and the prosperity of the region."⁸

For whatever reasons, antebellum southern women experienced frequent childbearing. Women often were either pregnant or nursing a baby every year of their marriage until their mid-forties, and devoted "thirty or more years" to the bearing and raising of children. Such fecundity prompted one southern physician of the period to conclude that "all women should be considered pregnant until proved other-

7. Ibid., 35, 24; Chesnut, *Civil War*, 28, 105.

8. McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 32, 33.