

LITTLE, JAWANA SOUTHERLAND, Ph.D. *A Hard Kind of Freedom: Absurdity, Choice, and Responsibility in the Writings of Harriet Jacobs and Toni Morrison*. (2013) Directed by Dr. Kathleen Casey. 130 pp.

Through the use of African American literature, I imagine the particular black feminist existential dilemma of black mothers who lived in this country as slaves. This was a time in history in which a child who was born to an enslaved mother was also by law considered a slave. This dissertation analyzes what happens when maternal rights are threatened and how racism and white patriarchal domination have impacted black motherhood. In this dissertation I construct a black feminist existential philosophy. Through my analysis of the intertextual connectedness of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (2002/1861) by Harriet Jacobs and *Beloved* (2004) by Toni Morrison, I articulate a theory about a complex account of the enslaved black woman's maternal subjectivity and an analysis of her absurd environment, her response to that environment through choice, and the responsibility involved in her decision. Using the slave narrative (*Incidents*) and neo-slave narrative (*Beloved*) as a focal point for contextualizing this ontological examination, I aim to engage the existential dilemma of the black woman and the ways in which the predicament of oppression, the possibility of agency within that oppression, and the implications of agency for the black mother can expand the present epistemology of black maternal subjectivity.

A HARD KIND OF FREEDOM: ABSURDITY, CHOICE, AND RESPONSIBILITY IN  
THE WRITINGS OF HARRIET JACOBS AND TONI MORRISON

by

Jawana Southerland Little

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro  
2013

Approved by

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Committee Co-Chair

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Committee Co-Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Jawana Southerland Little, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Co-Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Co-Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ without whom none of this would have been possible. When I look back over the journey that got me to this point, I know that beyond a shadow of a doubt it was Your Grace and Mercy that brought me through. It has not always been easy, and as I reflect on the closing of this chapter in my life, I see that God was using all of the sufferings, trials and triumphs that helped define this moment to draw me closer to Him. Thank you for your Grace. Thank you for loving me and using me as a vessel to do Your will. I will continue to seek first the kingdom of God and stand firm in knowing that I am a child of the most High—the Alpha and Omega—the beginning and the end—the Almighty.

I would also like to thank my three beautiful daughters who continue to inspire me. Having their love and life around me as I wrote and researched about women who lived with the constant risk of losing their own children kept me grounded. With their presence, I was always reminded of what is most important in life and how blessed I truly am. It is my earnest prayer that you all grow and move in this world with loving kindness and the confidence to know that with God all things are possible.

I must also thank my support system—my family—that believed in me from the very beginning. To my mother, you showed me that it is okay to make mistakes and that, in the end, everything will be alright. You gave me a foundation of strength and courage, and for that I will always be grateful. Dad, you never stopped believing in me, you always told me I could do it and advised me to take my time and take care of myself.

These words were very helpful in those tough moments. To my sisters, who have always supported me and never doubted me. To my newest sister, you are so determined and have shown me how important it is to have a goal and stick with it. You all have been great aunts to my girls, and all are true examples of what it means to be young, beautiful, intelligent and black. To my Aunt Linda, you opened your home to my children and family and I thank you for that. To my Aunt Shelia, thank you for reading to me when I was a little girl; you always told me that I was smart and that gave me the confidence to pursue my dreams. To my mother in law Carolyn, you have been a loving solid rock in my life. You listened and gave advice and lifted my spirits on so many occasions. Your strength and faith in God inspires me. To all of my many other aunts, uncles and cousins, together you make the family that keeps me going and I love you all dearly.

I must also thank my committee members and in particular Dr. Casey. You have a way of seeing and speaking into the future. There were times when you would tell me something and I would not understand it until weeks or months later. This is just a testament to your enduring wisdom and discerning spirit. When I wanted to give up you kept me going by reminding me of my purpose in pursuing this topic. You loved my story and you believed in my work. That means more to me than you can imagine.

Lastly, I must give a very extra special thank you to my husband. My dissertation became your dissertation. You invested so much in helping me see this through. You listened repeatedly and offered advice. You even read drafts and gave feedback. You sacrificed your own interests and made your family a priority and I am so grateful for

you. You have been there for the ups and the downs and at times you have seen me in a way that no one else has. You've been a shoulder to cry on and a prayer partner. We are truly a team. I know that God ordained our love and I look forward in sharing the next chapter of our lives together.

And finally, I must thank my ancestors. The mothers who came before me who sacrificed for their children, and for the race, so that I can be here in this place and time to reflect, reinterpret and recall their lasting legacy to all who will listen.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Every mother should be a true artist, who knows how to weave into her child's life images of grace and beauty, the true poet capable of writing on the soul of childhood the harmony of love and truth, and teaching it how to produce the grandest of all poems—the poetry of a true and noble life.

—“The Two Offers,” Francis Ellen Watkins Harper (1859)

The above quotation is an excerpt from the very first known piece of literary short fiction produced by an African American. Published during a time of racial and civil unrest, Francis Watkins Harper invites her readers to engage in a critique of maternal roles and obligations of mothers and the many complicated facets that exist within their experiences. In this particular moment, the narrator is speaking to a concern that is indicative of maternal emotions and what is at the heart of my dissertation—that every mother has a right to be a direct and positive influence on the lives of her children. This dissertation analyzes what happens when maternal rights are threatened and how racism and white patriarchal domination have impacted black motherhood.

Through the use of African American literature, I imagine the particular black feminist existential dilemma of black mothers who lived in this country as slaves. This was a time in history in which a child who was born to an enslaved mother was also by law considered a slave. As a result, enslaved black mothers had no rights, power, or control over what happened to their children. They could be sold, whipped, raped, or even killed by white slaveholders under due process of the law. The American institution

of slavery was a form of chattel slavery—humans “owned” other humans and traded kidnapped Africans for the fiscal progress of a new nation. The foundation of the black mother’s identity in America was therefore built on the concept of chattel slavery, and the ramifications of it unfold constantly.

History tends to look at the institution of slavery from a point of “functions” and “roles” while literature (particularly slave narratives which are the first literary genre of African-Americans in this country) give us more on the perspective and lived experience of the black mother. As historians attempt to convey facts, dates, and demographics, it is through the close reading of African-American literature that one can have an in-depth engagement with the experience of enslaved black mothers. In this dissertation, I create a version of black feminist existentialism as a philosophical frame, which allows readers to articulate and grapple with specific “questions of freedom, anguish, [and] responsibility” (Gordon, 1997, p. 3) in the lives of enslaved black mothers. Finally, my responsibility to this legacy is equally important as I educate a younger generation through a contextualization of correlations between past and present.

As a black mother, the reality of our slave history speaks to me in many ways. I came to this project as a mother, student and educator. All of these aspects of my life informed my final conclusions about this endeavor. I was always interested in the history of slavery in America especially since, as a child, I was taught that I was a descendant of enslaved Africans.<sup>1</sup> I would see family pictures of women who were born as slaves in

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<sup>1</sup> In the process of writing this dissertation, I discovered that, in addition to the women in my family that we already knew were enslaved, I am also a descendant of Nat Turner, the initiator of the largest slave uprising in the South. His mother, called Nancy of the Nile, was said to be an Afro-Israelite taken from the Nile

this country. I always wondered about their lives and the sufferings they endured. When I began to study African American literature in my undergraduate studies, I learned that there was so much more to the story than what I was taught before. Historical documents offer one interpretation—one that consistently strives at failed attempts in objectivity—while literature, through narrating and imagination conveys a more insightful perspective. It is the black struggle against oppression that is so richly conveyed in African-American literature with themes that embody the constant and recurring questions of liberation and humanity.

It was not until I started reading slave narratives that I began to get some understanding of how the enslaved black mother created meaning for her life and the lives of her children. It was Harriet Jacobs in particular who fascinated me. Her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in H. L. Gates's *The Classic Slave Narratives* (2002) allows the audience inside the life of a mother who defied all odds for her children despite the fact that she and her children were legally owned as slaves. As a mother, this was profound to me. At times it was hard to get through some of the information that Harriet Jacobs and other slave narrators convey. I would think about how difficult it would be to be in that situation. I could not bear the thought of being unable to protect my own child, be available for her, to provide a mother's comfort to her, or "weave into her life" all that is useful and important. In the case of enslaved mothers in this country, there was seemingly not much that could be done. It seemed hopeless. But Harriet

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river region of Africa and sold into slavery. I was most intrigued by his mother who was said to be a descendant of African royalty, and who constantly resisted enslavement and was whipped as punishment on several occasions (Drew, 2010).

Jacobs, and many other enslaved black mothers, did do something according to the narratives that were published.

I experienced difficulty in grasping this idea—that even in the worst of all possible conditions; one could still make her life meaningful in some way. If a mother is living the absurdity of slavery, and her children are “owned” by a slave system that can legally remove them from their mother’s care at any given moment, then one could assume that this mother does not have any maternal agency. Yet, after reading and studying Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (2004), I realized that these texts offered a different perspective. Both mothers—Linda in *Incidents* and Sethe in *Beloved*—chose in spite of their conditions. I was able to reinterpret their environment, choices, and consequences using my version of black feminist existentialism. These are two mothers living in extreme circumstances who made their lives meaningful. But they are women and they are black. In my reading of these works, I constantly leaned toward existentialism, but I was told that existentialism is not an appropriate theoretical frame for an analysis of the black experience.

Is it only a European philosophical construct that arrives at its conclusions through a white bourgeois lens? Traditional European existential philosophy focuses on “The centrality of such problems as the meaning of being human, [and] the concept of freedom” (L. Gordon, 2008b, p. 133). It addresses concerns pertaining to human existence but from a European perspective that excludes the complexities of blacks who are “denied any form of normality” in the social world. Within traditional European

existentialism, “One would find more bourgeois Angst than material conditions of black misery” (Gordon, 2000, p. 6).

Despite this, existential concepts of absurdity, freedom, and responsibility were heavily evident in *Incidents* and *Beloved*, and so I continued to further engage in this connection. One has to certainly acknowledge for example that the enslaved black mother did “wonder about freedom; suffer anguish; notice paradoxes of responsibility; have concerns of agency . . . or a burning desire for liberation” (Gordon, 2000, p. 7). But I struggled; I could not see beyond the oppression. It wasn’t until one day when I was sitting with my dissertation advisor and sharing my frustration with her that things changed. She offered an amazing revelation. She first asked me about the Civil Rights Movement and what blacks did in response to their oppression. I told her that they sat, unmoved by the violence inflicted upon them. They made a choice, she said, and there is always a choice. She reminded me that Martin Luther King Jr.’s strategy of non-violence was existential. Getting hit with a billy club for refusing to move is a choice. Even if the choice is followed by death, a choice to die can be authentic. The choices of the oppressed expose the oppressor. And I finally understood.

So, with a renewed fervor I embraced my existential strivings about the black mother in accordance with *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Beloved*. The historical reference of slavery found in both texts is central to an analysis of black maternal identity and liberation. As Robert Birt (1997) confirms, “Every struggle is historically situated” and so in order to conceptualize black liberation “one must begin with the historical situation of black people” (p. 211).

Finding the works of Lewis Gordon inspired me. Works such as *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Existential Philosophy* (1997), *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (2000), and *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (2008) discussed “the existential realities of theorizing blackness” (Gordon, 1997, p. 4), and dealt with questions of black identity forged in the absurdity of an anti-black world. Also known as a philosophy of black existence (an extension of Africana philosophy), black existentialism is predicated on the critique of white domination and the liberation of black people. Although a black philosophy of existence does address some of the same issues for black people that traditional existentialism did for European culture, Gordon tells us,

[I]t would be an error to construct Africana academic existential philosophy as a fundamentally Sartrean or European-based phenomenon. For although there are Africana philosophers who have been influenced by both Sartre and European thought . . . Africana philosophers already have a reason to raise existential questions of liberation and questions of identity . . . by virtue of racial oppression . . . manifested most vividly in the Atlantic slave trades. (2000, p. 9)

Additionally, particular works like Stephen Haymes’s “‘Us Ain’t Hogs, Us is Human Flesh’: Slave Pedagogy and the Problem of Ontology in African American Slave Culture” (2001) address specifically the existential dilemma of enslaved black people and their quest to reclaim their humanity and seek liberation within their own pedagogical framework. Lewis Gordon cites many other writers and thinkers, who although may not outwardly identify with black existentialism, produce scholarship that falls in line with its themes and concerns.

Perhaps the most influential for him was Frantz Fanon. Gordon admits that Fanon was pivotal in his own research and that his works definitely speak to the black existential condition and “the lived experience of the black” (Gordon, 1997, p. 9). I also found Fanon’s work—specifically *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)—to be insightful. However, I found Fanon’s assumptions on the “behavior” of black women to be oversimplified and unaware of the reality of the black woman’s experience under oppression. In his chapter “The Woman of Color and the White Man,” Fanon offers a critique of the French Caribbean novel *I am a Martinian Woman* (1941) by Mayotte Capécia. Fanon suggests that the main character’s desire to marry a white man is one that is “ridiculous” and that the “third rate” novel exemplifies “unhealthy behavior” of black women (p. 25). He remarks,

All of these frenzied women of color, frantic for a white man, are waiting. And one of these days they will catch themselves not wanting to look back, while dreaming of ‘a wonderful night, a wonderful love, a white man.’ Perhaps they too one day will realize that ‘white men don’t marry black women.’ But that’s the risk they have accepted; what they need is whiteness at any cost. (p. 31)

Fanon’s approach to the analysis of black women through this literary critique neglects to consider the black woman’s complicated consciousness with regard to race, sexuality, and her existential predicament grounded in the historical reality of white domination and patriarchal control. Harriet Jacobs as a slave, for instance, also chooses to have two children with a white man, but as discussed in Chapter 4 of this book, her decision is not an act of want or desire, but a response as complicated as her predicament, and one that is ultimately about her liberation from white oppression and degradation.

This, along with the apparent absence of black existential themes concerning the black woman and specifically the black mother, urged me in the quest for an articulation of my own theoretical framework. In my research of a black existential philosophy I found it to be useful for exploring issues of blackness and questions of personal responsibility and agency for black people, but limited in that it is not culturally specific to black women. Enslaved black women in particular made meaning and placed value on their own lives (and those of their children) by acting and being in the world—despite dehumanizing attempts of the white colonizer. So humanity (and motherhood), suffering, and survival all become a key component of her existential dilemma that differs from the dominant culture, and even that of the black male. Although black existential philosophy does articulate the importance of liberation for black people, it does not specifically deal with the gendered agency of black women.

Similarly, several theoretical dimensions of black feminism deal with the aforementioned complexities and struggles unique to black women, yet black feminism alone did not embody the existential critique that stood out to me in *Incidents* and *Beloved*. This is not to suggest that black feminism has been disadvantageous in this project; quite the opposite, it has been very helpful in articulating the black woman's experience and historicizing her relationship and responses to white male domination and control. Anthologies like *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave* (1982), *Reading Black Reading Feminist* (1990), and *The Black Feminist Reader* (2000) definitely seek to examine the inter-relationships of power, bodies, and social realities for black women. Like traditional feminism, black feminist scholars



expose multiple and alternate ways of studying and understanding the experiences of women while additionally taking great aims to include analyses related to intersecting positionalities such as race and gender. Yet, I have not come across a significant amount of work that addresses the existential dimension of the black mother's identity forged under oppression. My contribution deals with existential concepts of agency, suffering, and personal responsibility—and how these terms work with and against each other to articulate the experience of black motherhood. The enslaved black mother's freedom, choice and responsibility become so complicated because she exists within and against a constant white denial of her humanity. To deny humanity is to deny any form of consciousness. We thus explore her “freedom in the midst of very limited options” (L. Gordon, 2008b, p. 135).

In this dissertation I construct a black feminist existential philosophy. Through my analysis of the intertextual connectedness of *Incidents* and *Beloved*, I articulate a theory about a complex account of the enslaved black woman's maternal subjectivity and an analysis of her absurd environment, her response to that environment through choice, and the responsibility involved in her decision. Using the slave narrative (*Incidents*) and neo-slave narrative (*Beloved*) as a focal point for contextualizing this ontological examination, I aim to engage the existential dilemma of the black woman and the ways in which the predicament of oppression, the possibility of agency within that oppression, and the implications of agency for the black mother can expand the present epistemology of black maternal subjectivity.

Amongst the literary criticisms of both texts there is quite a bit of significant scholarship on black maternal identity. Terry Otten's *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison* (1989), and Andrea O'Reilly's *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (2004), as well as Angelyn Mitchell's *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (2002), and *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays* (Garfield & Zafar, 1996) are a few examples of the wealth of literary criticism that advanced my conclusion in this research. There are also many noteworthy philosophical scholars, (such as Haymes, Gordon, and Birt mentioned above), that address black existential concerns and even root them in the history of slavery in America. However, there is not a body of work to my knowledge that addresses the specific existential component of subjectivity of the black mother in literature. Further, there is a void in the scholarship on ways in which we as educators can teach a younger generation about African American literature and the trauma, suffering and healing that goes with this work. For example, in an attempt to adopt a textbook for a new course that I am offering, I found that the availability of textbooks and anthologies on this particular topic amazingly barren.

Black feminist existentialism becomes an important frame in the analysis of literature and the contextualization of black maternal identity because the issue of victimization and choice is fundamental in a discussion of the enslaved black mother's ways of being in the world. Traditionally, literary scholars and historians who research and write about black women and slavery reinstate the pain, anguish, torture and horrid graphic details of rapes, whippings, and mutilation that occurred during the transatlantic

slave trade and during the 18th and 19th century in America. These are all atrocities acted upon the black woman that are not only told and retold as if she was a contributing member of a performance, but also work to reinscribe her objectivity. From this perspective, one may perceive that these black women did not exert much agency over their own lives. From these horrid and graphic accounts derive narratives of black women that are suffocating and restrictive. Very little has been discussed of how she may have identified and authenticated her selfhood by establishing agency as an enslaved woman. It is my argument that the institution of slavery, as the beginnings of black women's identity in America, birthed these limiting paradigms and has thus restricted the freedom to consider and understand a vast array of complex identities and ways of existing in the world for black women.

Enslaved black mothers endured the meaningless experience of society's imposition of a sub-human identity. They made choices despite their circumstances. A confirmation of black humanity must encompass the notion that everyone is capable of making choices and that everyone is responsible for her decisions. It was a refusal to be determined that made the stories of Linda and Sethe so remarkable to me. Even though they may not have had total freedom they chose to make meaning out of their lives and the lives of their children.

*A Hard Kind of Freedom*, this dissertation, is constructed as an intertextual literary analysis that sketches the enslaved black mothers existential dilemma and her response to it. Chapter II, "Representation, Intertextuality and the Dialectic of Identity," traces African-American literature's representation of enslaved black mothers by outlining first

their struggle for maternal rights and autonomy, and how quite often the black mother's response is re-imagined as maternal violence in the African-American literary tradition. Included here will be a thorough examination of intertextuality as methodology and its imperative role in my analysis of the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative that speak to each other through the parallel and multidimensional themes they address. I will then focus on my use of the specific texts for explication, *Incidents* and *Beloved* and why I chose these pieces. Also addressed here is how the question of recovering voice is answered in the dialogic and relational qualities of the texts.

Chapter III, "Hell on Earth: Absurdity, Terror, and Nothingness" begins an analysis of *Incidents* and *Beloved* by examining the recurring illusion of the black woman's absurd lived experience as hell on earth. Both texts metaphorically convey the slaveholding society as an environment consumed with evil and terror. It is within these absurd conditions that the enslaved black mother formulates her choices about how she will make her life meaningful.

As both Linda and Sethe decide that they will not accept the conditions under which they have been subjected, they determine that they will take action to reclaim their maternal autonomy. Chapter IV, "Freedom and the Choice to Act" explicitly examines their choices and the existential conflict between choice and option within a slaveholding society.

The closing analysis is a reflection on the complexity of Linda and Sethe's maternal strivings. Chapter V, "Consequences of a Victim's Actions" addresses the concept of humanness through responsibility. Although, both mothers respond to their

absurd environment in order to protect their children from enduring the evils of slavery, they both make decisions that ultimately cause harm to their children. Discussed here is the similarity of this paradoxical conflict in both texts and how, in spite of their conditions, Linda and Sethe construct their own morality to fight the immorality of slavery.

The conclusion of this project discusses the implications of this analysis for a broader understanding of the impact of slavery on black maternal identity. I also suggest that the pain that derives from our historical past can be healed through rememory in an educational environment. A study of African American literature like *Incidents* and *Beloved* can be effective in providing a context to discuss, question and learn from our tragic historical past. I posit that education is transformational in this way and that further exploration like this is useful for a younger generation that we as educators encounter.

**CHAPTER II**

**REPRESENTATION, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND THE DIALECTIC OF  
IDENTITY (METHODOLOGY)**

There are many significant contributions in the African American literary tradition that speak to the complexities, tragedies and triumphs evident in the black mother-child relationship as it was forged in slavery. “Indeed, black women’s writing . . . is one tradition . . . where the mother is prominently featured in complex and multiple ways” (Hirsch, 1990, p. 415). Quite often these texts reveal the impact of bondage on the mother “that either separates her from her child or so enervates and depletes her that she as no self;” and, on the child, with damaging “consequences for [her] inner life” (Schapiro, 1994, p. 128). There is a passionate and emotional response in these texts that portray the deep wounding of black maternal identity. In this chapter, I identify the challenges and shifts in representations of maternal black subjectivity in black women’s writings. I discuss the absences in early literature and the emergence of later writings that attempt to reveal what earlier writings could not. I then define intertextuality as a methodology and how it is appropriate for this dissertation. I end with an explanation of the dialectic of identity as collective interpretation and the importance of imagination and perspective in understanding the past.

**Representation in Literature**

Antebellum and post-bellum literature written by black women stands as a glaring “presentation and representation” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 12) of what happens when a mother

is left with little to no claim over her own life or the lives of her children. Marianne Hirsch (1990) states, “The mother’s discourse, *when it can be voiced at all*, [emphasis in original] is always . . . literal [and] hopelessly representational. It is rooted in the body that shivers, hurts, bleeds, suffers [and] burns” (p. 426). Hirsch further explains:

The economy of slavery circumscribes not only the process of individuation and subject formation, but also heightens and intensifies the experience of motherhood—of connection and separation.

It raises questions about what it means to have a self, and to give that self away . . . If mothers cannot ‘own’ their children or themselves, they experience separation and loss all the more intensely. (p. 428)

It is because of this immense “separation and loss” that many literary contributions construct the black mother’s response to her environment as one consisting of complexity and outrage. Adding to Joanne Braxton’s (1989) conceptualization of the outraged mother, Kathleen Casey (1993) describes the black mother’s fury as not necessarily anger in and of itself, but the exertion of a maternal need to protect children from the harm of white society. This particular outrage is “righteous and constructive, more often attending to those *for* [emphasis in original] whom the speaker feels fearful than attacking those *against* whom she feels rage” (p. 147). The result then is what we see in many African-American literary texts—the black mother who because of her “desperate anxiety about her children’s welfare in an inimical society” believes that she can only “claim [her] children through acts of violence” (Dawkins, 2010, pp. 223–224). Perhaps the most notable work that reimagines this violence is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (2004), but as Laura Dawkins (2010) points out, works such as “Angelina Weld Grimke’s short

story ‘The Closing Door’ (1919), Georgia Douglas Johnson’s one-act drama *Safe* (c. 1929), and Shirley Graham’s play *It’s Morning* (1940)” have all offered

[d]isturbing portrayals of black motherhood . . . ‘Saving’ her child from ‘a world of cruelty and sin’ through infanticide, the black mother in each of these works kills not in rage but in the name of love. (p. 223)

These portrayals of maternal violence amplify the conditions found in the very first stories in American literature concerning the black mother’s predicament. The emergence of the passionate black mother figure—torn, desperate, and subjugated, yet willful and agential—serves as a reflection of the socio-cultural shift in black maternal identity in America *post* emancipation. The authors of these works, such as Gayle Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), J. California Cooper’s *Family* (1992), just to name a few, “dramatiz[e] not what was done to slave women, but what they did with what was done to them” (McDowell, 1989, p. 146). These authors feel compelled to articulate what earlier works could not say about the black mother’s predicament.

“Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* 1861), Frances Harper (*Iola Leroy* 1893), and Pauline Hopkins (*Contending Forces* 1900)—portray . . . the pathos of mother-child separations within slavery” (Dawkins, 2010, p. 224) but do so within restrictions and conventions of the time period in which they were published. As the first African American literary genre, slave narratives are our first representations of “the material and immoral circumstances of slavery” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 8). “The central abolitionist project of exposing the evils of the Southern plantation (and the false



paternalistic myths supporting it) became the absolute priority of the antebellum slave narrative” (Gould, 2007, p. 19). Yet for the enslaved African mother to tell her story was an extreme self-sacrifice that threatened to further subjugate the narrator.

“[R]epresentations of the often humiliating experiences of slave . . . women potentially exacerbated former slaves’ vulnerability in their readers’ eyes” (Santamarina, 2007, p. 232). The enslaved black woman faced a moral dilemma in choosing to tell her story. In order to gain the sympathy of readers, enslaved women were positioned on a very thin line of victimization. If she told of the degradation she endured, she could ironically be outcast for speaking about her experience.

Slave narratives were used as political tools to fuel the push for emancipation. The narrators were dependent on the approval of their white supporters and audiences. This had consequences on the shaping of the narratives. Angelyn Mitchell (2002) explains the conflicting agenda of the black female slave narrative in this way,

To have been completely authentic in constructing the enslaved Black woman’s life would have jeopardized the potential power of the text as a fulcrum for social change; moreover nineteenth-century constructs of womanhood (as well as nineteenth-century literary conventions) could not openly accommodate, for racist, sexist, and political reasons, the Black woman’s story. (p. 9)

Harriet Jacobs, for instance, wrote under pseudonym Linda Brent and concealed the names of all of the people in her narrative, including her master and the father of her children. Jacobs emerges as Linda Brent to “guardedly tell her story so as not to offend her audience” (p. 9). Not only were early black female writers particularly silenced, but the authenticity of their stories was also questioned. The first writings ever published by

African-Americans, such as slave narratives, were prefaced with authenticating documents by whites to confirm the validity of the work. Phyllis Wheatley (the first African American to publish a book), for example, was only reputable in conjunction with preceding documents written by her master John Wheatley and a letter signed by 18 white males (including John Hancock and governor Thomas Hutchinson) confirming that, after a series of examinations, she had actually written the poetry. Gates explains, “These prefatory materials helped establish a convention, a kind of interracial literary etiquette, that white readers soon came to expect when encountering an African American author” (Gates & McKay, 2004, p. 214). Blacks were not believed to be capable of any form of literacy let alone poetry, and whites such as Thomas Jefferson confirmed this belief: “Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism” (Jefferson, 1781). It is because of this ideology and the nature of the content found in her work, that we find underlining the title of Jacobs’s narrative the phrase “Written by Herself” to confirm that she was actually the author of the narrative. And although Jacobs’s narrative “occupies a crucial place in the history of both African American and American women’s literature” (Gates & McKay, 2004, p. 279), her life story was also subject to scrutiny by her contemporaries and literary scholars studying her work decades later. Until Jean Fagan Yellin compiled “the definitive edition of the text” scholars such as John Blassingame believed that Jacobs did not actually write the narrative and that “because of the literary stylings of the story, Jacobs’s life experiences were not true and that she did not even exist” (Goldsby, 1996, p. 12).

As earlier black women's writing about slavery was questioned and silenced, antecedent black women writers emerged to give back much that was lost, hidden or denied in the black female literary tradition—most importantly the representation of America's slave history. Also called “emancipatory narratives” by Angelyn Mitchell (2002)—who uses the term to disassociate the word “slave” from the definitive substance of the characters embodied in these works—the neo-slave narrative serves as a part of “historical fiction” that adds complexity by “disclosing the subjectivity and interiority of enslaved Black women and their worlds” (p. 11). What emerges is a quest to reveal the consciousness of black mothers. The fascination with the peculiar institution of slavery has caused an alteration in the master narrative that portrays slavery and the slave as one-dimensional entities too harsh to forget and too painful to remember. Hortense Spillers (2003) explains

As many times as we reopen slavery's closure, we are hurtled rapidly forward into the dizzying motions of a symbolic enterprise, and it becomes increasingly clear that the cultural synthesis we call 'slavery' was never homogeneous in its practices and conception, nor unitary in the faces it has yielded. (p. 179)

As our literary representations of slavery shift, we begin to see the cultivation of the black mother's subjectivity emerge. Neo-slave or emancipatory narratives bring forth a new and fresh perspective on the previously silenced plurality of black life within the confines of white domination and ultimately help us to re-imagine black maternal identity. Morrison's *Beloved* does this in a way that actually moves us from the plantation to the mind of Sethe, and we begin to understand the complexity of her existential predicament and what ultimately fuels her decisions. Considering this, we

also must not forget or diminish the significance of works like Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: much was omitted but much was also given. Jacob's took the courage to tell what she could about her experience and we still find a substantial amount of solid, endearing and glaring examples of what it meant for Jacobs to choose in the midst of limited options.

Both texts suggest the ways in which representation can be informative and conditional. Jacob's obviously hid some things from her readers and Julia Child, her white female editor and patron, influenced her writing. Jacobs intently transforms her reality into a fiction. Morrison's work develops as a product of her own imagination about the inner life of Margaret Garner—the enslaved black mother who is the basis for Morrison's *Beloved*.

### **Intertextuality**

It is for the aforementioned reasons that I chose Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* for this project utilizing intertextuality. Jacobs's narrative stands as an imperative foundational text while Morrison's novel represents the emergence of a new era in black women's discourse. Both texts speak to each other in a way that is "dialogic and relational" (Mitchell, 2002, 12). Intertextuality as a method enables one to join the past to the present and is "central to the theories of African-American literature" (Page, 1995, p. 21). As the "perception of similar comparabilities from text to text" (Alfaro, 1996, p. 279), intertextuality supports my endeavor to explicate the ways in which Jacobs and Morrison speak to each other and also speak to me. Transformed by Bakhtin's notion of "dialogism," Julia Kristeva's

(1986) *Word, Dialogue and Novel* conceptualizes intertextuality as “an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning), as a *dialogue* [emphasis added] among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context” (p. 36). A novel or literary work does not have just one meaning; there are multiple meanings that reflect the societal constructs and ideologies present in our everyday lives. I am analyzing these two works through intertextuality because they both spoke to me about the ways in which the enslaved black mother through her existential dilemma found agency and lived her own version of freedom. “Intertextuality denotes that any text is the absorption and transformation of another text” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 12), and in this case Morrison is an intertext for Jacobs because she could not have her story without that of Jacobs, and alternately “Morrison’s employment of the enslaved mother figure broadens our understanding of the mother image presented in Jacob’s *Incidents*” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 12).

Part of the appeal in *Incidents* and *Beloved* is the highly evident black feminist existential themes that reside in them. Both Jacobs and Morrison construct black mothers, Linda and Sethe, who must struggle with the dilemma of exerting maternal control over the condition of their children’s lives, which includes protecting them from the evils of a white slaveholding society. Both mothers recognize the overwhelming reality of their children’s condition as property. Linda and Sethe then chose within their conditions, to act and take claim over their children’s lives no matter the cost. *Incidents* and *Beloved* intersect at the existential themes of absurdity, anguish, choice, responsibility and freedom. The ways in which the characters are openly and honestly

ambiguous reflects the multiple and competing dimensions of an enslaved mother's life. Ambiguity in a literary sense is not a term that defines uncertainty; in this framework ambiguity represents the possibility of various meanings that may derive from a text or context. In reflecting the "interlocutory, or dialogic, character" (Henderson, 1990, p. 118) of literature pertaining to slavery and black maternal subjectivity, ambiguity is a necessary element in the African-American literary tradition as it invites intertextuality by "transforming and retaining narrative patterns and strategies in endless possibility" (McDowell, 1990, p. 107). Neither Linda nor Sethe is pardoned for her decisions. Slavery has not left them void of choice and their victimization has not left them void of responsibility. It is in this way that both narratives "allegoriz[e] losses and survivals, endurances and resistances [and] the deep and abiding grief that lies in the slave history and its legacies" (Christianse, 2013, p. 23). Both *Incidents* and *Beloved* verbalize the unfinished narrative of the grim reality of slavery—that life goes on unapologetically and ever changing, even in the perils of dehumanization and degradation. Evident here is a reciprocal exchange about the construction of black maternal identity in the midst of suffering and how human fallibility is complexly performed. As "the work of the artist is always to negotiate . . . contradictions, not to deny them" (Reid-Pharr, 2007, p. 140), it is the unveiling of the many contradictions in an enslaved black mothers life that constitute both *Incidents* and *Beloved* as remarkably important texts.

### **Dialectic of Identity**

Black women's writing about slavery is extraordinarily significant to black female subjectivity. As "one cannot read African American writings without being aware of

their place in the history of being black in America” (Christianse, 2013, p. 23), these two texts speak to me in many ways. I identify with the characters in both texts and I recognize that the historical relevance provided in each work helps me understand a bit more about my own identity. America’s slave history is my history, Sethe’s and Linda’s history, and that of the entire society. At once we are compelled to draw on the strengths and weaknesses of these characters because they are who we are. At the intersection of Jacobs and Morrison’s work is a conversation; they are speaking for each distinctive time period and simultaneously bridging past and present. These conversations, that both construct and affirm identity for past present and future generations inform what Mae Gwendolyn Henderson (1990) defines as the “*dialectic of identity*” (p. 119). She states

If black women speak from a multiple and complex social, historical, and cultural positionality which, in effect, constitutes black female subjectivity . . . black women enter into a *dialectic of identity* with those aspects of self shared with others . . .

It is their rereading of the notion of tradition within a field of gender and ethnicity that supports and enables the notion of community among those who share a common history, language, and culture. (pp. 199–120)

Both texts reflect slavery’s lasting impact on generations of mothers and children.

Ultimately, these texts converse about responsibility, and not who is at fault, but what one must do with the life she is given.

Jacobs’s narrative, just like any other narrative is a highly constructed piece. As it speaks to me and other members of its audience, there is an emotional resonance that emerges. Through a “*dialectic of identity*,” individual perspectives inform a larger group commonality that can be gleaned from the narrative elements. This is completely

different from verisimilitude. Connected to the ambiguity they exude, these narratives do not interact with a literal truth; they bond with the individual significance each reader brings to them.

### **Perspectival Truths**

Admittedly, there is slippage between the analysis of women's slave narratives and the 21st century analysis of them. Any inquiry into America's slave history will always be through the lens of the present, and will therefore bring about some reconstruction of the slave narrative tradition. But what cannot be denied is the importance of the meaning a reader generates from this inquiry.

Meaning develops as the reader interacts with the text, for meaning does not reside within the text itself. And because each reader's view of truth is perspectival, the interpretation of a text that emerges when a reader interacts with a text will necessarily be different from every other reader's interpretation. (Bressler, 1999, p. 120)

Recovering voice, speaking for these texts, and assuming claims about the lives of black mothers in slavery then is ultimately a challenging endeavor. As Saidiya Hartman (1996) explains,

The effort to reconstruct the history of the dominated is not discontinuous with dominant accounts or official history but, rather, is a struggle within and against the constraints and silences imposed by the nature of the archive . . . This effort is enmeshed with the relations of power and dominance that it strives to write against; in this regard, it both resists and complies with the official narratives of slavery and freedom . . . A totalizing history cannot be constructed [without an acknowledgement of] the impossibility of reconstituting the past free from the disfigurements of present concerns. (p. 11)



As Hartman suggests, we must all be conscious of the fact that any attempt to capture the historical past of oppressed people such as that of enslaved black mothers, must be in conjunction with an active awareness of the influence of the white dominant narrative on that history. This task is met however with “The hope of gaining a glimpse of black life during slavery and the postbellum period while remaining aware of the impossibility of fully reconstitution the experience of the enslaved” (Hartman, 1996, p. 11). As mentioned above, the method of intertextuality is inclusive of the reader or audience. Intertextuality is not only defined in “all the possible relations among texts” but also through “its reader and all the reader’s possible reactions to the text” (Alfaro, 1996, p. 279). We cannot deny that all writers consider audience when constructing a work. Deborah McDowell (1990) confirms,

Given the complexity and ambiguity inherent in questions of audience, one can only speculate about the audience for whom a specific text seems intended. To be certain, authors cannot determine conclusively who their actual readers are. Nevertheless, all writers begin by fictionalizing or imagining an audience. (p. 93)

We know that Jacob’s, for instance, was heavily influenced by her white readership and therefore constructed her narrative in part for the purpose of abolition.

Toni Morrison (2008) recognizes the importance of audience and acknowledges her critical role as a writer and reader of African-American female literary representations of slavery:

My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate’. The exercise is also crucial for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. (p. 70)

She suggests that exercise of re-imagining and reinterpreting a slave past involves a method of “literary archaeology” a process by which “on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply.” Morrison also admits “memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me” (p. 71). Consequently, creations that portray and or theoretically evaluate narratives such as Jacobs’s emphasize the notion that our perspective of the lived experience of enslaved black mothers is subjective, and may allow space for previously excluded voices to emerge.

However, despite the various interpretations that may arrive from readers—particularly of texts that construct multifaceted correlations—the audience has a responsibility to the work as well as the cultural context of the project. In my research, I have also had to approach the literary texts with an awareness of the influential nature of white dominant meanings as well as my own epistemological stance in the final results and conclusions of this project. My analysis of the lives of enslaved black mothers through *Incidents* and *Beloved* does not seek to discover a definitive answer or an ultimate truth. I am constructing an important interpretation that adds to the crucial body of work already present and currently being produced about the subject of black maternal identity and slavery. Mitchell (2002) adds, “As literary production is, in fact, a social activity, what one discovers in any published text is a give and take (at the very least between author and audience) in which competing versions of ‘reality’ are recognized, if not always reconciled” (p. 140).

In conclusion, intertextuality is the methodology in use for the following analysis of the existential dilemma of the enslaved black mother through the text of *Incidents* and *Beloved* because it helps to reflect “the primary concerns of bondage and freedom.” This method of literary critique “facilitates an examination and discussion of slavery and its legacy, interrogates the dynamics and dialectics of bondage and freedom and posits a usable past” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 14). Through a dialectic of identity, the texts are speaking to each other and to me about slavery and black motherhood. My theoretical contribution does offer a valuable component to a persistent and ever-changing body of critiques and assumptions. The presentation and representation of our slave past is at the same time formidable and discerning. “Rather than using representation of slavery primarily to protest past and present oppression . . . black writers have begun to represent slavery in order to explore the process of self-creation under extremely oppressive conditions” (Kizer, 2004, p. 11). The pain and oppression endured by kidnapped African women was passed to their children and their children’s children and so on. There are cultural scars that were once inflicted on black women that are now still suffered, unhealed and manifest in the complexity of black female identity and American cultural identity. Our engagement with the past always reflects the present. Consequently, *Incidents* and *Beloved* are analyzed here as significant bodies of work that communicate the existential predicament of the black mother under the institution of slavery.

### CHAPTER III

#### HELL ON EARTH: THE ABSURDITY, TERROR, AND NOTHINGNESS

There are many tragedies that encompass the ‘unfairness’ of the world.

Disastrous incidents become moments capable of plummeting someone into a direct confrontation with the Absurd. The absurd is not only a “feeling” but also a “notion” (Camus, 1955, p. 23). The absurd is the encounter of what Camus (1955) calls the “irrational” or unreasonably senseless occurrences, and the person who experiences or is affected by them. As Camus suggests, this confrontation derives from a “horde of irrations” that “surrounds” the individual, and that individual’s “lucidity” or moment in which the “feeling of the absurd becomes clear and definite” (p. 16). In what follows I will focus on the absurd setting as a hell on earth for the enslaved mothers in both *Incidents* and *Beloved*. I will examine specifically how the texts portray evil as a metaphor and a presence that represents the severance of maternal rights and control. Both texts contain parallel images and metaphors of evilness, terror, and nothingness. I will discuss them from various angles in order to show the absurd setting both authors convey.

The irrational is evident in many atrocities committed by dominant groups (i.e., genocide, colonization, and slavery) when these groups of people exercise power to create and control other populations. When the victims experience these atrocities they encounter the absurd. White colonizers forcing kidnapped Africans to perform unpaid

labor for the purposes of forming a new nation—a nation that was created in the name of freedom from Britain’s tyranny and control—represents the irrational. To create a Declaration of Independence that states all men are created equal, one that is written and signed by many of America’s slaveholding “founding fathers” is irrational—to treat people as chattel—is irrational. It is no wonder that one of the most impactful slave revolts, Nat Turner’s Rebellion, was influenced by a document that blatantly pointed out the irrational and contradictory nature of antebellum America. David Walker’s *Appeal* (1892)<sup>2</sup>—patterned and structured purposefully to mirror the preamble to the U.S. Constitution—incited fury in the hearts and minds of those enslaved by suggesting that America’s demise was inevitable because of the absurd conditions under which it was constructed.

Can our condition be any worse?—Can it be more mean and abject? Can they get us any lower? . . . I appeal . . . , to awaken in the breasts of my afflicted, degraded and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in the *Republican Land of Liberty!!!!!!* [Emphasis in original] (p. 229)

In his condemnation of American slavery, Frederick Douglass (1845) also cites the absurdity of slavery as evident in the hypocrisy in Christian principles upon which America was founded and the crimes against humanity that slavery purports:

Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of

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<sup>2</sup> David Walker described as “the most militant voice among the early African-American protest writers” (Gates, 2004, p. 227), wrote the *Appeal* in response to slavery’s dehumanization of blacks. Born to a free mother, Walker, although not enslaved, saw the deplorable conditions of Africans in America. Soon after the publication of the *Appeal* Walker died of poison. It was his document that was said to have influenced Nat Turner’s Rebellion.

all frauds, and the grossest of all libels . . . We have menstealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members . . . The Christianity of America is a Christianity of whose votaries it may be as truly said, as it was of the ancient scribes and Pharisees . . . (pp. 448–449)

The absurdity of a racialized and oppressive society allowed black men, women and children to encounter the futile experience of existing under the fiction of racism and white superiority. And because of the acts committed by white slaveholders who sought financial prosperity and political stability through the unpaid labor of kidnapped Africans, enslaved black mothers in particular were forced to live in a meaningless world.

The setting in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (2002/1861) and *Beloved* (2004) is situated in an environment that exposes slavery's incongruities. In both texts, the extreme absurdity of the life of the enslaved black mothers is metaphorically represented as a lived environment of hell on earth. Linda Brent admits that her existential crisis was formed by the lived experience of slavery's atmosphere,

I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair. (pp. 500–501)

Black mothers endured the tremendous physical, mental and emotional abuse of an absurd world. Patricia Hill Collins (1995) confirms, “African-American women, as a group, experience a different world than those who are not black and female . . . these experiences stimulate a distinctive black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality” (p. 339). Linda Brent expresses her frustration with her conditions as an enslaved mother raising a black daughter,

When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own. (p. 294)

In *Beloved* and *Incidents* the enslaved black mothers' constant confrontations with the absurd are re-casted as an environment of terror, demons and torture. We see the setting in both novels—hell on earth—as a metaphor for the absurd life. Both authors posit the violence and terror that whites inflicted on black women and their children as almost unimaginable. In *Beloved*, Sethe remembers the Sweet Home plantation as a property that was aesthetically appealing, and at the same time, unmistakably horrifying. She begins to reconnect with the beauty of the trees, and then what enters into her memory are the bodies of young blacks who hung there after being lynched by whites:

[And] suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shames her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (p. 7)

As the passage suggests, Sethe believes she is living a life tantamount to hell and blames herself for not being able to fully engage in the memory of the terror she endured. She associates the beauty of her former slave plantation, ironically named Sweet Home, as an illusion of splendor and terror. Because of what occurred on the plantation, there is a contradiction of beauty and horror in Sethe's mind. The passage reflects the tension

between the attractiveness of the property on the one hand, and the shock of lynching on the other, and Sethe cannot get either image out of her mind. Terry Otten (1989) explains that Sweet Home was “the most Illusory of Edens . . . it camouflaged the evil enterprise it represented” (p. 81).

Similarly, in *Incidents* Linda Brent explains her experience of living in hell as a result of the bondage of slavery. In order to capture the existential depths of her ongoing suffering, she figuratively depicts her atmosphere by citing “The Lament Of Tasso” by Lord Byron to describe “the land of [her] birth.” Ironically, the poem is about the Italian poet Torquato Tasso, and his spell in an asylum in Rome. Tasso suffered from schizophrenia, and Byron composed the passage to lament Tasso’s time in a mental hospital in St. Anna (“Tasso”). The poem is the perfect metaphor for America’s slaveholding society where nothing is as it should be. Brent quotes Byron:

Where laughter is not mirth; nor thought the mind;/ Nor words a language; nor  
e’en men mankind./ Where cries reply to curses, shrieks to blows, /And each is  
tortured in his separate hell. (p. 481)

Her mention of “The Lament of Tasso”<sup>3</sup> is a testament to the extent of Linda’s suffering and the individual and collective sufferings of enslaved black mothers. Whites of a slaveholding society are therefore represented as demonic forces because of the relentless torture they inflicted on blacks. Linda mentions a neighbor as an example of the evil energies whites possessed as they inflicted torture on enslaved blacks:

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<sup>3</sup> What is interesting about Linda’s mention of Lord Byron is that she rarely discusses her path to literacy or education in her narrative. Citing Byron reveals the sophistication of Jacobs’s education, but her omission of a heavy focus on the acquisition of literacy shows the ways in which priorities for women narrators differed from men.



Another neighbor was a Mrs. Wade. At no hour of the day was there cessation of the lash on her premises. Her labors began with the dawn, and did not cease till long after nightfall. The barn was her particular place of torture. There she lashed the slaves with the might of a man. An old slave of hers once said to me, "It is hell in missis's house. 'Pears I can never get out. Day and night I prays to die." (p. 493)

Both *Incidents* and *Beloved* portray the white slaveholding society as a systematic living hell and white people as demons that operate under the auspices of Slavery, or the devil himself. In fact, Linda attributes her seemingly immoral decisions, and the heart of her existential predicament, to the corruption she suffered at the hands of slavery.

It is specifically the monster-like white male slaveholder that embodies the "steal, kill and destroy" motif of Lucifer. John 10:10 describes the actions of Satan and warns Christian followers of his plans to cause total destruction and chaos in their lives: "The thief [most often interpreted as Satan] comes only to steal kill and destroy." It is here that we see Satan posited as the destroyer of worlds. The ultimate architect of destruction and ruin who aims only to cause harm. Satan's actions are further described in 1 Pet. 5:8: "Be alert, be on watch! Your enemy, the Devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." It is this same beast-like source of destruction brought on by whites to enslaved blacks.

Linda discloses Dr. Flint's terrorizing nature and the awfulness of his verbal and sexual abuse: "For my master, whose restless, craving, vicious nature roved about day and night, seeking whom to devour, had just left me, with stinging, scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain like fire" (p. 459). Similarly, in *Beloved* Sethe's mother-in-law has some strong beliefs of the terrorizing nature of whites in a slaveholding

society. She figuratively assigns them the qualities of supernatural and simultaneously demonic beings: “Grandma Baby said there was no defense—they could prowl at will, change from one mind to another, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did” (Morrison, 2004, p. 287). It is here that Morrison signifies the white ideology of the subhuman black woman. Based on her experiences Baby Suggs believes that slaveholding whites are actually the ones who are not human.

In both literary texts there are figurative images of a white male who reigns to wreak havoc—roaming around seeking to devour the black mother and her children. When Linda tells of the ramifications innocent black people suffered in her area after Nat Turner’s rebellion, she alludes to this fact quite plainly, “Everywhere men, women, and children were whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet. . . . All day long these unfeeling wretches went round, like a troop of demons, terrifying and tormenting the helpless” (p. 512). Linda also carefully details an account of a neighboring enslaved mother, Charity, and the murder of her “little boy, James” who had attempted to run away:

[H]e decided, . . . to have [James] placed between the screws of the cotton gin, . . . This wretched creature was cut with the whip from his head to his foot, then washed with strong brine, to prevent the flesh from mortifying, and make it heal sooner than it otherwise would. . . . When the press was unscrewed, the dead body was found partly eaten by rats and vermin. Perhaps the rats that devoured his bread had gnawed him before life was extinct. . . . *The master who did these things was highly educated, and styled a perfect gentleman. He also boasted the name and standing of a Christian, though Satan never had a truer follower* [emphasis in original]. (pp. 494–495)

Further, when introducing Mrs. Flint, her “mistress,” she specifies her violent and sadistic nature, “She had not the strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash” (p. 453). As evidenced in both passages, the vast amounts of torture present in a slaveholding society were remarkable. Created here is an underlying message about the interpretative slave tradition of black people and their understanding about slaveholding whites that are the source of all chaos and absurdity in their lives. Most slave narratives purposefully detail the violent nature of the white slaveholder. Narrators such as Jacobs gave such vivid accounts of their horrible experiences while testifying to their deep emotional suffering so that readers could understand the depths of their suffering and identify with their humanity. The persuasive appeal of narratives such as *Incidents*, and the specifically horrific detail, grasp at the emotions of white people by exposing the demonic and immoral reality of slavery.

Understandably so, neo-slave narratives not only communicate this same script of nightmarish violence, but also convey the generational effect of that violence. Valerie Smith (2007) explains,

These texts illustrate the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities. Further, they provide a perspective on . . . the challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories [and] the legacy of slavery (and other atrocities) for subsequent generations. (p. 169)

As a contemporary reflection on the past horrors of slavery, Morrison’s *Beloved* speaks to Jacobs’s *Incidents* in order to articulate more than the violent narrative that has already

been exposed about slavery. Although Morrison does not omit the violent details enslaved black mothers suffered, (for they are essential to an understanding of its impact), she combines with it a socio-political commentary about the impact of slavery's residue and the black woman's existential dilemma evidenced in choices she had to make. Otten (1989) explains, "There is no question . . . that slavery and its proponents are the consummate evil in the novel"; however, "the moral authority of *Beloved* resides . . . in a revelation of slavery's nefarious ability to invert moral categories and behavior and to impose tragic choice" (p. 83). Her main character, Sethe, is forced to respond to slavery's hellish nature, and the "tragic" choice of both she and Linda is a reflection of slavery's brutality and immorality.

The reality of slavery for black mothers represents an encounter with the absurd, but seeing her children live that same reality constitutes exposure to horror. In both texts, as well as other detailed reports of slavery, we find the reality of slavery's cruel and vicious nature towards children. It was bad enough that black women had to endure the living hell of enslavement, but what is far more worse is to see one's child live that experience and not be able to stop it from happening. We find many documented accounts of how the system of slavery incited child abuse, torture and murder on young children. In *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, Lydia Child (1836), the abolitionist who helped Jacobs publish her narrative, describes a most horrific event involving a toddler aboard a slave ship:

A child on board a slave-ship, of about ten months old, took sulk and would not eat; the captain flogged it with a cat-o'-nine tails; swearing that he would make it eat, or kill it. From this, and other ill-treatment, the limbs swelled. He then

ordered some water to be made hot to abate the swelling. But even his tender mercies were cruel. The cook, on putting his hand into the water, said it was too hot. Upon this the captain swore at him, and ordered the feet to be put in. This was done. The nails and skin came off. Oiled cloths were then put around them. The child was at length tied to a heavy log. Two or three days afterwards, the captain caught it up again,' and repeated that he would make it eat, or kill it. He immediately flogged it again, and in a quarter of an hour it died. And after the babe was dead, whom should the barbarian select to throw it over- board, but the wretched mother! In vain she tried to avoid the office. He beat her, till he made her take up the child and carry it to the side of the vessel. She then dropped it into the sea, turning her head the other way, that she might not see it. (p. 18)

Slavery's treatment of children is amazingly cruel. There are times in which children were left to starve, and even infant babies would have to go hungry so that white babies could eat. Linda speaks of her own mother that had been "weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food" (p. 447). She also recalls Dr. Flint's cook who "endured many cruelties from her master and mistress; sometimes she was locked up away from her nursing baby for a whole day and night" (p. 454). Similarly, we see in *Beloved* how Sethe was horrified at her violation by school teacher and his pupils most importantly because they "took her milk." When Paul D is amazed at the treatment she suffers (and the "tree" of lacerations on her back from being whipped) at Sweet Home, she can only recall this incident as the most atrocious:

"I had milk," she said. "I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl" . . . "All I knew was I had to get milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me . . ."

"Men don't; know nothing much," said Paul D . . . "but they do know a suckling can't be away from its mother for long."

"Then they know what it's like to send your children off when your breasts are full." "We was talking 'bout a tree, Sethe."

“After I left you, those [white] boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on ‘em. She had that lump and couldn’t speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.”

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (Morrison, 2004, pp. 19–20)

The abuse of children, the violation of pregnant women, and the starvation of nursing infants, all constitute examples of acts of horror that black mothers experienced. Jerome Miller (1992) explains,

[H]orror is what first discloses to us the upsetting possibility that our world as a whole can cease to be . . . and experience of horror occurs when the center which holds that world together is threatened and we begin to suspect that it is possible for its existence to be undermined. (p. 130)

I am positing children as the center of an enslaved black mother’s world, and suggesting that the crimes committed against these pregnant women and children threatened their lives, and the lives of black culture as a whole.

Despite the suffering black mothers experienced within a slaveholding society, they were able to live with a glimpse of hope. The birth of Linda Brent’s son “excited a mixture of love and pain. When I was most sorely oppressed I found a solace in his smiles” (p. 510). But it is the pain and anguish of the loss of that child that plummets the enslaved black mother into the lonely and desolate pit of hell that is her existential

“experience of nothingness” (Casey, 1993, p. 32). For the black mother in an always already absurd world, losing one’s child constitutes the vicious rupture of one’s world. It inflicts an indescribable pain in the hearts of enslaved black mothers.

The abjuration of the mother-child relationship within a white patriarchal system is the most salient example of absurdity. Every milestone, every developmental “first” is proceeded by the possibility that her child may be taken away. Linda tells us “I loved to watch [my son’s] infant slumbers; but always there was a dark cloud over my enjoyment. I could never forget that he was a slave” (p. 510). When children were sold, the black mother experienced her worst nightmare. She lived in an environment in which she was constantly taunted by the legal kidnapping, violation and abuse of her own children. It is absurd to enslave a woman, call her less than human and then take away the right to mother. The right to love, nurture, discipline, and protect her children was threatened.

Black women under the institution of slavery were not legally considered to be women, and so, the rights of motherhood were not afforded to them. “Slave women were classified as ‘breeders’ as opposed to ‘mothers’, their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows” (Davis 1983, p. 7). And so, the black woman’s existential predicament places her in the position of defending her own humanity and her claim as mother to her children. Linda Brent also later explains, “Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner’s stock. They are put on par with animals” (p. 495).

“When one loses the center that holds one’s world together and makes it a world, one does not just foresee its possible annihilation. One actually suffers it. Until that

happens one has only intimations of horror, inklings of nothingness, presentiments of total loss” (Miller, 1992, p. 134). When black mothers lost their children to the auction block, when her child was sold off to a faraway plantation or killed by the hands of a slave trader, it is just as if “the ground on which [she] stood is out from under her feet” (Miller, 1992, p. 135).

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs is described as a woman who “did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive”; this caused a great emptiness “for the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home” (Morrison, 2004, p. 165). The moment in which a child is kidnapped from its mother represents a horrific encounter with the absurd. What then emerges is a suffering of annihilation—an experience with nothingness. This is a moment in which one engages in living a “non-freedom” or a moment of helplessness. What constitutes human freedom is the ability to choose, and when black mothers lost their children to the “demon Slavery,” even if for a moment, they were left with no choice—they were utterly defenseless. The enslaved mother lived a moment in which she grapples with the nothingness in her life brought on by the absence of her children. Linda describes a woman, who makes claim of her experience of nothingness after the loss of her children,

‘My Lord and Master, help me! My load is more than I can bear. God has hid himself from me, and I am left in darkness and misery.’ Then striking her breast she continued, ‘I can’t tell you what is in here! They’ve got all my children. Last week they took the last one. God only knows where they’ve sold her. They let me have her sixteen years, and then—O! O! Pray for her, brothers and sisters! I’ve got nothing to live for now. God make my time short!’ (p. 519)



This mother mourns for her children—for children who were her “world” and who were suddenly absent in her life. This feeling of suspension or being thrown into the abyss constitutes the enslaved black mother’s existential experience of nothingness. “Such mortal anguish deconstructs the person who is horrified by bringing him down into the abyss instead of allowing him to remain standing on the verge of it” (Miller, 1992, p. 135). Hence, what is projected is a sudden moment in which irrationality and absurdity bring nothingness into their lives. Miller further explains, “Nothingness delivers on all the promises horror made on its behalf not by becoming actual, but by swallowing everything real and leaving one destitute” (Miller, 1992, p. 135). When a mother loses a child, that destitution is brought about by an absence that becomes present in her reality.

One may make the reasonable argument that we all experience some form of absurdity considering that all humans may experience some sudden occurrence that impacts their lives. As Linda states, “Every where the years bring to all enough of sin and sorrow” (p. 471). However, the lived experience of an enslaved black mother is of a particular existential orientation that was unique to her specific oppressed subjectivity and her individual dilemmas. As Linda further tells, “in slavery the very dawn of life is darkened by these shadows. Even the little child . . . will become prematurely knowing in evil things” (p. 471). It is this fact, along with the fact that these experiences are happening to an entire culture of mothers—an experience that had affected generations and generations of women, mothers and children years after its demise—that causes its particular existential orientation to lie in the “material reality” of its intersubjectivity.

The enslaved black mother's experience of nothingness—so deeply connected to her children—is generationally pervasive and becomes part of the interpretive tradition.

“What does the person have left who has lost what meant everything to him? Simply nothing, simply nothingness itself” (Miller, 1992, p. 183). Living within a slaveholding society the enslaved black mother was a human purported as property, a mother asserted as a breeder, and a woman forced to endure sexual violation coupled with the violation of maternal rights. But it is when white slaveholders abducted her children that the enslaved black mother experienced the ultimate advance of an absurd encounter. Baby Suggs's epiphany about the life of enslavement in which “men and women were moved around like checkers” (p. 25) deems slavery not only cruel because people were claimed as chattel, but also particularly unjust because of the separation of child and mother: “What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (p. 26).

The loss of a child for any mother is devastating, but what is so interesting about both *Beloved* and *Incidents* is that the authors do an amazing job of showing the ways in which the loss of children for enslaved black women was exceptionally cruel. Although she did not need to be recognized as a human being to believe that she was, it is through a connection with her children that she permeated her agency. Linda admittedly states that her “life was bound up in her children” (p. 553). It is safe to say that the agency the black mother exerts over her children is synonymous with the agency she claims for herself because her children were an extension of self. Sethe's thoughts about her children also

exemplify this quite well: “The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* alright, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean” (Morrison, 2004, p. 296).

As Morrison (2004) describes Sethe’s action when the slaveholder “schoolteacher” arrived to take her and her children back into captivity we see the depth of this complex agency: “She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, way, over there where they would be safe” (p. 192). It is here that we see Sethe grappling to avoid the nothingness that will not just come from losing her children but losing them to slavery. To lose those children to slavery for Sethe is to lose one’s world. Miller (1992) further claims, “Nothingness is no mere absence because it is not the loss of an object that was merely present. It does not remove an object; it deconstructs a world” (p. 180). It is out of this specific deconstruction that Sethe resorts to the attempted murder and infanticide that will be discussed in the following chapter.

### **Madness**

Although “there are any number of possible responses to the intrusion of nothingness into our world” (Miller, 1992, p. 183), the particular reaction to absurdity and nothingness for the enslaved black mother that is portrayed in both texts is a rupture of sanity, or the moment when the mother loses her mind. Linda describes what she witnesses,

I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that *some* of them would be taken from her; but they took *all*. . . . met that mother in the street, and her wild haggard face lives to-day in my mind. She wrung her hands in

anguish, and exclaimed, 'Gone! All gone! Why *don't* God kill me?' . . .  
Instances of this kind are of daily, yea, of hourly occurrence. (p. 457)

The madness that the black mother experienced because of her mental anguish is a manner consistent with dominated people who are deprived of normality in the social world, and particularly oppressed mothers who are denied any right or claim to their children. Gordon explains,

Black defiance to black dehumanization has been historically constituted as *madness* or social deviance. Blackness thus functions as the breakdown of reason, which situates black existence in a nonrational category of faith. Blacks live on, as Dostoyevsky might say, in spite of logic. (1997, p. 5)

Specific to black women, Patricia Hill Collins adds, "African-American women . . . grow into womanhood in a world where the saner you are, the madder you are made to appear" (1995, p. 350). This lunacy attributed to the absurdity of enslavement and the nothingness of child abduction is perhaps best described by Camus (1955),

As for the thorne in [her] heart [s]he is careful not to quiet the pain. On the contrary, [s]he awakens it and, . . . [s]he builds up piece by piece—lucidity, refusal, make-believe—a category of the [wo]man possessed. That face both tender and sneering, those pirouettes followed by a cry from the heart are the absurd spirit itself grappling with a reality beyond its comprehension. (pp. 19–20)

It is precisely the madness of a "make-believe" world incited by the loss of her children that causes Baby Suggs's friend to be executed in *Beloved*. She had mentally suffered so much that mania caused her to believe that baby ducks were her own lost children. When she attempts to steal "back" the ducks, she is caught and hanged. Paul D describes her as

the “witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies” (Morrison, 2004, p. 76).

In *Beloved*, we see this madness posited as a mental escape for the enslaved black mother who can no longer cope with reality without her children. The trauma produced by slavery was sometimes more than what one could bear. It was “safer” for the black mother to lose her mind rather than struggle to comprehend the absurdity that surrounded her life. When Paul D tells Sethe that her husband had gone crazy after seeing her being sexually violated by school teacher and his pupils, Sethe actually longs for the peace of insanity:

Why was there nothing [her brain] refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up . . . Add my husband to it, watching . . . looking down on what I couldn't look at at all . . . There is also my husband squatting by the churn smearing the butter as well as its clabber all over his face because the milk they took is on his mind . . . and my brain would go right ahead and take it and never say, No thank you. I don't want to know or have to remember that. . . .

Other people went crazy, why couldn't she? Other peoples brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new . . . And how sweet that would have been: the two of them back by the milk shed, squatting by the churn, smashing cold, lumpy butter into their faces with not a care in the world. Feeling it slippery, sticky—rubbing it in their hair, watching it squeeze through their fingers. What a relief to stop it right there. Close. Shut. Squeeze the butter. But her three children were chewing sugar teat under a blanket on their way to Ohio and no butter play would change that. (Morrison, 2004, pp. 83–84)

I've quoted this passage at length because we find in its entirety that Sethe longs for insanity; to lose her mind like her husband did, but lunacy is not a privilege that was afforded to her because she had a responsibility to her children. Despite the sexual

violation that “took her milk” and the bloody whipping that left a “tree” on her back, she had to go on. She had to remain sane, to remain present in her hellish reality so that she could join her children in Ohio. In this context, insanity is a choice. What is also interesting is that Morrison constructs moments of insanity for the black mothers in the novel who have lost their children, and Sethe had not. It was Baby Suggs who lost “children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone” and as a result, went to bed “and thought about color for the rest of her life” (Morrison, 2004, p. 209). It was “Baby Suggs’ friend—a young woman in a bonnet” who “developed some permanent craziness” and whose “food was full of tears” (Morrison, 2004, p. 114). But it is because of her children that Sethe must go on—it is because of them that her mind will accept anything until her actions come back to haunt her as further discussed in Chapter V.

It is the despicable acts—the crimes against the most innocent of humanity—that cause authors of both *Incidents* and *Beloved* to suggest that whites of a slaveholding society are themselves inhuman. This notion is ironic considering that the justification for slavery was bound up in a cultural context in which the black mother’s “humanity is interrogated and negated” (Haymes, 2001, p. 140). The texts signify this paradigm of slavery and allude to the multiple ways in which the whites of a slaveholding society lost their humanness when they stripped away the “inalienable” human rights of blacks. As we learn more about the life of the character Stamp Paid in *Beloved*, we see why he has such a strong dedication to helping run-aways escape and hideout. It is his experience of enslavement, his own wife’s sexual violation, and all the terror he has seen black women

and children endure. It was the murder of a child that “had worn out his marrow” and caused him to ultimately question the humanity of whites as a whole:

Tying his flatbed up on the bank of the Licking River, securing it the best he could, he caught sight of something red on its bottom. Reaching for it, he thought it was a cardinal feather stuck to his boat. He tugged and what came loose in his hand was a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp. . . . On the way home, he stopped, short of breath and dizzy . . . Rested, he got to his feet, but before he took a step he turned to look back down the road he was traveling and said, to is frozen mud and the river beyond, “What *are* these people? You tell me, Jesus. What *are* they?” (Morrison, 2004, pp. 210–211)

The violence of which whites were capable are crimes against humanity, crimes that black characters in both texts believe are only committed by inhuman monster-like demonic beings without a soul or conscience. It is for this reason we find Baby Suggs’s last words before her death, as a declaration of what she has gathered about the world and the brutal life of bondage she and her children were forced to live for sixty years, “Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed, . . . There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks . . . they don’t know when to stop” (Morrison, 2004, pp. 102–103, 121)

The traumatic experiences brought on by the experience of slavery produced literal and figurative scars of a “particular existential orientation” (Haymes, 2001, p. 132). Linda confirms, “No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men” (p. 470). In a world where humans can be expected to treat each, other with a certain level of kindness, decency and respect, the rupture in morality that arrived from slavery,

constituted “that denseness and strangeness of the world” that “is the absurd” (Camus, 1955, p. 11). Black mothers inherently expected normality; the world offered irrationality, and then absurdity sprung forth. In order for absurdity to exist, there not only has to be an irrational environment, but also an expectation of decency from the person experiencing it. It is because of this fact that Jacobs admits that her “experiences in slavery had filled [her] with distrust” and she “knew that she could not expect kindness or confidence from [her white mistress] under the circumstances in which she was placed” (p. 477). Her experience of the irrational, like that of many enslaved black mothers, brought forth a confrontation with the absurd.

For enslaved black mothers, the irrationality of enslavement and the confrontation with the absurdity brought forth sorrow and suffering with no reasonable explanation. It is a mother’s confrontation with unpredictable terror and meaningless suffering. As Camus (1955) states, “This world in itself is not reasonable . . . but what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on [wo]man as on the world” (p. 16). Within this context, the absurd is actually the enslaved black woman’s confrontation with the irrational and the strangeness, or as Dubois (1903) calls it, the “peculiar” institution of slavery (p. 694). “Everything begins with consciousness” (Camus, 1955, p. 10) and the enslaved black woman must know who she is as a woman and mother, and the way things should be (that she nor her children should be violated); as a member of the oppressed population of the human race, she has an “authentic” and “expanding” consciousness that “comprehends” the immense immorality of the torture, sale, and



separation of her children (Birt, 1997, p. 211). She must recognize her environment and what Jacobs calls “the widespread moral ruin occasioned by this wicked system” that should “seem impossible among human beings with immortal souls” (p. 499). She must understand the vast impact and injustice of her experience. bell hooks suggests that “the oppressed, the exploited make [them]selves subject” by understanding “how structures of domination work in [their] own lives” (1990, p. 15). The “curse” of enslavement, therefore, was irrational; what then becomes absurd is “the all pervading corruption produced by slavery” (Jacobs, p. 497) and the black mother’s experience of being enslaved.

Because of course she does experience the existential phenomena of human responsibility, the black woman’s experiences of an absurd world are deeply connected to her ways of affirming humanity and motherhood in the midst of dominant white meanings. This consciousness to survive is communal because the black woman is faced with the absurdity of proving humanness to herself and to others while also creating meaning out of the her choices to see her children survive in a white racist society. “Choosing to continue to live on in spite of enslavement is a philosophical question that is associated with the slave’s consciousness of his or her value or worth as a human being” (Haymes, 2001, p. 130). Survival becomes an existential situation, and for an enslaved black woman, choosing not to flee, or making a life or death decision about her children, constitutes her existential dilemma.

## CHAPTER IV

### FREEDOM AND THE CHOICE TO ACT

This chapter follows the exploration of Linda and Sethe's absurd environment by looking at the enslaved black mother's responses to that absurdity. Here I will explore the concept of action as a proclamation of humanity. I will also examine Linda and Sethe's commitment to the safety and well-being of their children and what happens when that right is taken away. Included here is an exploration of the meaning behind the specific choices the two characters made in regards to their children and the issue of responsibility found in both texts.

Both *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (2002/1861) and *Beloved* (2004) reflect the enslaved black mother's use of choice and action to respond to absurdity. The enslaved black mother's maternal subjectivity rests in the fact that although she is left with very little claim to her children's lives, she does have the option as a human being in any situation, any oppressive condition, to act. Sartre (1957) explains that existentialism "defines [wo]man in terms of action . . . there is no doctrine more optimistic, since [wo]man's destiny is within [her]self . . . the only hope is in [her] acting and that action is the only thing that enables a [wo] man to live" (p. 357).

As a result of the absurd conditions enslaved black mothers endured, their decisions and their actions grasped at a hard kind of freedom. Both Linda and Sethe

prove that enslaved black women were able to exert agency, but the freedom afforded was always already situated in an oppressive condition. As Yancey (2011) explains,

To understand Black-being-in-the-world [one must first understand that the black] self is always already ensconced within a larger historical context of prejudices and value-laden assumptions that mediate and shape self-understanding and the understanding of the world and Others. (p. 554)

White oppression must therefore be viewed as a context of the black woman's existence, or as Sartre (1957) in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* calls it, a "condition"—further defined as the situation formed beforehand, or "a priori limits which outline [wo]man's fundamental situation in the universe." He further explains that "[A] [wo]man may be born a slave" as a unique condition, but what is universal for *any* human being "is the necessity for [her] to exist in the world, to be at work there, to be there in the midst of other people, and to be mortal there" (p. 359). Human freedom therefore is not completely diminished based on any condition. One's condition does not eradicate one's freedom. For if we believe oppression is determinism—if it was the complete essence of a black mother—her human freedom would be nonexistent. Linda Brent acknowledges this revelation:

I had not lived fourteen years in slavery for nothing. I had felt, seen, and heard enough, to read the characters, and question the motives, of those around me. The war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered. Alas, for me! (p. 460)

The act of affirming their claim to a freedom is the foundation of Linda's and Sethe's restricted agency. And so, the black mother's existential situation, as L. Gordon

suggests, gives “primacy to agency and freedom” and “makes culture more of a context than a determinism” (2008b, p. 139). What we see reflected in both *Incidents* and *Beloved* is the will and hope these mothers carried that allowed them to persevere in their choices. In spite of it all, both Linda and Sethe opt to decide and to claim.

### **Linda’s Hard Kind of Freedom**

In *Incidents* we find evidence of Linda Brent’s grasp at freedom in her determination. She notes the fault in the thinking of neighboring enslaved blacks who do not readily identify their own humanness and who in many cases, believe the lies that white slaveholders tell them about the nature of freedom. “Many of the slaves believe such stories, and think it is not worthwhile to exchange slavery for such a hard kind of freedom” (p. 488). Although she recognizes that the “persecuted race” of blacks are “compelled to drink” from “the cup of sin, and shame, and misery” that slavery yields (p. 473), she still believes that “some threads of joy” could “be woven into [her] dark destiny” (p. 475).

We first see the depths of Linda’s existential dilemma when she discusses the complexity of her choice in lovers. Dr. Flint’s ultimate plan for Linda was to seclude her from the others so that he could have his way with her:

In the blandest tones, he told me that he was going to build a small house for me, in a secluded place, four miles away from the town. I shuddered; but I was constrained to listen, while he talked of his intention to give me a home of my own, and to make a lady of me. (p. 499)

The thought of being subjected to Dr. Flint’s desires is dreadful, yet the foundation of Linda’s existential despair lies in the fact that she cannot be with the man that she truly

loves. As a young woman, Linda falls in love with a free black man. She describes him as “a young colored carpenter” that she “loved with all the ardor of a young girl’s first love” (p. 482). She wittingly calls the relationship her “love-dream” that had been her “support through many trials.” The “free-born” black man proposes to marry her.

However, she is still owned as a slave by Dr. Flint, and knows that he is “too willful and arbitrary a man to consent to that arrangement.” So, Linda struggles with the desire she has to be with this man, who is unnamed in the text, and the fate she is sure will come if she attempts to marry him. “[W]hen I reflected that I was a slave, and that the laws gave no sanction to the marriage of such, my heart sank within me” (p. 482). Despite her predicament, she attempts to get Flint to consent to her marriage. The request is met with physical abuse, death threats and of course an adamant “no.” He commands,

Never let me hear that fellow’s name mentioned again. If I ever know of your speaking to him, I will cowhide you both; and if I catch him lurking about my premises, I will shoot him as soon as I would a dog . . . I’ll teach you a lesson about marriage and free niggers. (p. 484)

It is within this passage we find Dr. Flint using the tactic of dehumanization to remind Linda of which man holds the power over her and to relegate the man she loves to an animal. This is the point at which Linda experiences the complete emptiness and helplessness that comes from the oppression of slavery. As Yancey (2011) explains, “The existential weight of the [black] struggle . . . presupposes the capacity of white Others who have the political and material power to make non-whites suffer” (p. 554). Linda is not free enough to marry the black man she loves because she is owned by the

white man she hates. And although she could opt to marry him anyway, and suffer the consequences, she knows that her lover would never be able to buy her from Flint.

There was no hope that the doctor would consent to sell me on any terms. He had an iron will, and was determined to keep me, and to conquer me. My lover was an intelligent and religious man. Even if he could have obtained permission to marry me while I was a slave, the marriage would give him no power to protect me from my master. It would have made him miserable to witness the insults I should have been subjected to. (pp. 486–487)

Even before they are conceived, she thinks about the future of their children and how it would be impacted by the infamous slave code that forces the “child to follow the condition of the mother.” She knows that even if her husband is free, because of her status, her children would still be slaves. Linda exclaims, “What a terrible blight that would be on the heart of a free, intelligent father! For *his* sake, I felt that I ought not to link his fate with my own unhappy destiny” (p. 486). Caught in this existential predicament that leaves her “lonely and desolate,” Linda turns toward choosing, or as she calls it “something akin to freedom.” Mitchell (2002) adds, “This phrase signals Brent’s understanding of the parameters of her existence, parameters of ‘compulsion and assent’ that she cannot simply vanquish by her sheer will. Brent may be desperate and even reckless in her choice, but she is not hopeless” (p. 35).

Linda hates Flint for what he keeps her from, and so, as an act of revenge, and again in consideration of the future children she will have, she chooses to engage in a sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, a white “educated and eloquent gentleman” who has shown kindness and interest in her. She decides to act after being backed in a corner.

And Linda chooses her lover from the options afforded to her. Although degraded and destitute, because she constricted in her choices, she explains her freedom in this way,

To be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. (p. 501)

Pressing up and against the remote darkness and of slavery, Linda decides to “give herself” to the white man who could buy her and her children's freedom. Yet, she makes sure to note that she was just fifteen years old when Sands courted her. This alludes quietly plainly to Sands' position as not quite the hero, but more so the lesser of two evils. The choice she made was not easy; she is essentially torn by her decision:

I thought and thought, till I became desperate, and made a plunge into the abyss . . . If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; . . . but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. (p. 504)

This passage captures the reality of Jacobs's existential experience. Although she has tapped into her ability to choose, her actions send her into the “abyss”—she is forced into a place void of normality.

Often, white slave holders dehumanized and then attempted to reconstruct black women as property for labor and reproduction. “Black women were victims of rape, and sexual violence and quite often bore children fathered by the slave owner who raped them” (Collins, 2000, p. 51). White patriarchal slave owners like Dr. Flint perpetuated

the peculiar institution of slavery by using children produced under slavery to continue its oppression. He in fact profited from his own children he fathered by enslaved women in this way. "I had seen several women sold, with his babies at the breast. He never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife" (p. 502). In regards to her children, Flint tells Linda, "These brats will bring me a handsome sum of money one of these days" (p. 532). So out of revenge and to avoid being relegated to the cottage where she is set to be Dr. Flint's sex slave, Linda becomes pregnant twice by Mr. Sands. "Brent's choice shows that miscegenation could be used as a tool of resistance" (Mitchell, 2002, p. 35). Many of Linda's decisions develop because she knows that her children will adopt her same slave status. She does not want to see her children follow her path of enslavement. Linda resists slavery's grasp on her children's lives by having a sexual relationship the one white man she feels will purchase their freedom.

Even in an instance such as slavery, a time in which most black women were collectively living the same absurdity of enslavement and degradation, there are multiple and competing versions of these lived experiences. Linda takes claim of her consent and further establishes her subjectivity and her humanness. Tate explains, "The willful exchange of female sexual experience for the preservation of psychological autonomy and the assertion of political freedom were radical, indeed revolutionary acts for a woman, white or black, to execute, let alone to record in a public document" (as cited in Mitchell, 2002, p. 35). This is what makes Harriet Jacobs's narrative so unique and powerful. She was a woman placed in extreme conditions in which she was denied



normalcy; she was sexually harassed and possibly raped by Dr. Flint, yet she states that she feels the closest to freedom that she can get under these circumstances by having sex with Mr. Sands. She taps into the “destiny within” to find a way to make a better life for her children. She reaches for some hope that she and her children may become free citizens.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Jacob’s narrative is the “escape” she makes to her grandmother’s garret. She decides that in order to fully get away from the clutches of her master, she must leave. But she does not want to leave her children. From documented accounts of slavery’s history we find that enslaved black mothers embodied the fight vs. flight concept; they often chose not to physically run away from the plantation. While the enslaved black man “moved North in his quest for freedom and literacy” (Braxton, 1989, p. 21), the woman chose to stay for her children. Mitchell adds

Ironically, motherhood could cause the enslaved woman to feign complacency since escape or insurrection was more complicated for the enslaved mother. There were cases, nonetheless, where motherhood provided the impetus or inspiration for rebellion or escape. (p. 26).

Jacobs’s text considerably embodies the ambiguity of freedom in her escape scene, but it also weaves in and out of the fight versus flight concept. She chooses not to physically leave her place of captivity, but to hide. Her choice comes at the precipice of active abolition and pre-Civil War murmurs of emancipation. She knows of the advantages of a successful escape to the North. But her dilemma lies in the traumatic thought of leaving her children.

I was meditating upon some means of escape for myself and my children. Dr. Flint was suspicious, and determined not to loosen his grasp upon us. I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Every trial I endured, every sacrifice I made for their sakes. (p. 540)

Her family's well-being is at the heart of her concern. Linda selects a very particular form of survival—that of simultaneous escape and captivity. So she removes herself so that she can save her children from being sold. The concept of abandonment then is reimagined or reinvented as an act of salvation from mother to child. Linda's "prolonged sequestering of herself in her grandmother's garret, a space roughly twice the size of a coffin, where she almost dies several times" (JanMohamed, 2005, p. 3) is the immeasurable sacrifice of a mother suspended in a paradoxical predicament of escape and captivity. The "coffin-like" garret that she lives in for seven years mimics a grave. Linda has therefore submitted herself to darkness or in a way is now buried alive. It is this action that is her response to the absurdity of slave life. She rejects the notion to leave her children while also rejecting to be enslaved:

The garret was only nine feet long, and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air. . . . To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread on the floor. I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof. The rats and mice ran over my bed; but I was weary, and I slept such sleep as the wretched may, when a tempest has passed over them. (p. 567)

The reality of Linda's decision is that even though she has "run away" she is still "in the master's house." She is hiding in her grandmother's attic, but very much so

within the realm of Dr. Flint and capable of being caught. Linda's attic scene of a self-imprisonment is quite representative of her existential predicament and gets at the heart of the absence/presence dichotomy. This scene disrupts the absence/presence dichotomy by suggesting that Linda's existential predicament lies in the fact that she has evaded the clutches of "slavery's devour;" however, she can never be fully free of it. As an enslaved mother, Linda signified an absent presence in a white slaveholding society—she was stripped of many civil liberties afforded to human beings—her humanness was absent as if she did not exist yet her body was yet present for subjugation. Linda takes claim to her life and uses her limited autonomy to liberate herself and attempt to free her children. She does this by becoming a present absence in the house of her grandmother. She answers absurdity by not being there and being there. This is also what makes her hiding place so significant. This is the self-sacrifice component of her maternal subjectivity. Jacobs selects a very particular form of survival—that of simultaneous escape and captivity. Linda's decision exemplifies the problem of a black mother's freedom and the burning desire for liberation within a slaveholding society.

### **Sethe's Rough Choice**

The issue of humanity and inferiority was at the heart of the justification for slavery. It is Thomas Jefferson (1781) in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* who compares black women with animals and deems the black race as inferior to white:

The first difference which strikes us is that of colour. Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oran-ootan for the black women over those of his own species . . . I advance it

therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.

It was also Samuel George Morton, the famous doctor and anthropologist, who concluded around 1849 that the “small” cranial capacity of “American-born Negroes” yields them to be “the lowest grade of humanity” (Menand, 2001, pp. 102–103). Yancey (2011) purports, “The Black self has struggled to understand and define itself within a context where whiteness functions as a transcendental norm . . . Hence, whiteness as synonymous with humanity is purchased not only through opposition, but negation” (p. 554). In this sense, whiteness can only exist if there is blackness, yet blackness is not only an opposite to whiteness but also a negative. As Morrison re-imagines the depth of the enslaved black mother’s experience, she posits Sethe as a black mother who defies dehumanization. Sethe becomes conscious of the white negation of black humanity and this ultimately incites her to flee the Sweet Home plantation. While working on the Sweet Home plantation she hears schoolteacher giving one of his lessons:

He was talking to his pupils and I heard him say, “Which one are you doing?” And one of the boys said, “Sethe.” That’s when I stopped because I heard my name, and then I took a few steps to where I could see what they was doing. Schoolteacher was standing over one of them with one hand behind his back . . . . I was about to turn around and keep on my way to where the muslin was, when I heard him say, “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up.” (p. 226)

It is in this moment that Sethe first learns of the white negation of her humanity. She is not even quite sure of the meaning of the term “characteristics,” but when she finds out,

she determines that she must flee and take her children with her: “So I sent you all to the wagon with the woman who waited in the corn. Ha ha. No notebook for my babies and no measuring string neither” (p. 233). She does not want her children to be categorized as any less than they are. “Schoolteacher projects a subtle evil wearing the mask of civilization. Only Sethe’s unrestrained, irrational, barbarous act of love upon her own child could stop him . . .” (Otten, 1989, p. 86).

For Sethe, her freedom is also connected to her choices and actions; they are however, executed quite differently than Jacobs’s. It seems that Sethe’s decision to take her children to the shed, attempt to kill three and successfully murder her “crawling-already?” baby is the way to end her child’s existence within a slaveholding society. Sethe has already attempted to run-away, and because of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, she is found by Schoolteacher who plans to take her and her children back to Sweet Home into slavery. Sethe is discovered only 28 days into her freedom. And so the death of her children becomes her final option.

Sethe’s “rough choice” (as labeled by Baby Suggs) is perhaps Morrison’s way of conveying a strong social commentary about the ground on which slavery survived in America—the false notion that blacks were inferior human beings. Much of Sethe’s infanticide is about negating the animal characteristics that were given to her by Schoolteacher, and how the white negation of her humanity fueled her violent response. Otten (1989) claims,

Schoolteacher symbolizes the most treacherous kind of institutional evil . . .  
Schoolteacher’s ubiquitous notebook is emblematic of the disinterested scientific

racism that had marked Western culture. His is a far more sinister evil than the atrocities perpetuated by his ‘nephews,’ for it attacks the very soul itself. (p. 86)

Through Sethe’s character, Morrison re-presents the sub-human status afforded to blacks as a complex paradigm of antebellum America. Throughout the novel, Morrison juxtaposes the human/animal dichotomy in interesting ways. Morrison purposefully makes the distinction between human and animal ambiguous for both enslaved blacks and white slaveholders. At once, we see Morrison making an intriguing statement about the validity of the beast inside the enslaved black mother. The novel does incite metaphors that posit Sethe as animal. When it comes to her children and the complex dilemma of their survival, Sethe metaphorically transforms into certain specific creatures. While Sethe is running away she goes into labor “on a ridge of pine near the Ohio River”. She hears someone approaching and fears that she is “about to be discovered by a whiteboy”. Her instincts compel her and she morphs from within.

She told Denver that *something* came up out of the earth into her—like a freezing, but moving too, like jaws inside . . . Suddenly she was eager for his eyes, to bit into them; to gnaw his cheek. . . . ‘I’m laughing now but it’s true. I wasn’t just set to do it. I was hungry to do it. Like a snake. All jaws and hungry.’ (p. 38)

The snake can be symbolic of fertility, or in this case, a venomous creature. The snake becomes an extension of Seth’s victimized self so much so that when answering Amy Denver, “down in the grass, like the snake she believed she was, Sethe opened her mouth, and instead of fangs and a split tongue, out shot the truth” (p. 39). Sethe becomes the snake in the garden as Morrison sets the stage for relaying the “ambiguity of the garden and the serpent” and a setting “couched at times in seemingly contradictory truths: rebels

becoming heroes, good creating evil; gardens that oppress, sins that redeem” (Otten, 1989, p. 3). And during her quest for freedom for herself as well as her unborn baby Sethe becomes a snake ready to attack.

Another instance of Sethe’s metamorphosis occurs the moment she realizes that schoolteacher has discovered her and is coming to take her and her children back into captivity. When she first sees the “hat” that is coming to capture her and her children, like a hawk, Sethe grows wings and she flies. “[S]he flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws, how she collected them every which way; one on her shoulder, one under her arm, one by the hand, the other shouted forward into the woodshed” (p. 185). With the swiftness of a bird she collects her children and takes them to the shed to be slaughtered. It is here that Morrison is alluding to the flying African motif that is apart of the slave narrative interpretive tradition. The African American folktale “All God’s Chillen had Wings” tells the story of the flying Africans:

Once all African could fly like birds; but owing to their many transgressions, their wings were taken away. There remained, here and there, in the sea islands and out-of-the-way places in the low county, some who had been overlooked, and had retained the power of flight, though they looked like other men. (Gates, 2004, p. 132)

“Flight, in this case, functions not merely as an individual or ‘universal’ symbol of transcendence, but as a collective symbol of resistance by a specific group within a socio-historical context. In this case, flight transcends a particular state of . . . slavery” that was not ‘fixed’ or ‘final’” (Wilentz, 1990, p. 21).

Morrison's use of the animal metaphors to describe Sethe is done ironically as the aftermath of Sethe's epiphany about slavery. She responds "like an animal" in resistance to the notion that she has animal characteristics. Her response also comes as a defense against the application of the subhuman narrative to her children. "And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no" (p. 294). Haymes (2001) suggests that, "[S]lavery shaped the existential and historical predicament of black slaves in the Americas. This is a predicament characterized not only by the slave's doubting her humanity but also by her being in the absurd position of defending her humanity" (p. 136).

The white negation of black humanity is, therefore, is an important piece of the scene of infanticide. Morrison even shows us the internal thought process of the white slaveholder after he witnesses Sethe nearly decapitate her daughter. What is significant is that, for Sethe, the act of murder is an act of resistance to slavery while for Schoolteacher, it affirms his beliefs about the animalistic qualities of black people. As he is thinking about the reasons why this has happened he can only go back to Sethe's animal characteristics:

But now she'd gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat her and made her cut and run. Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education. Or Chipper or Samson. Supposed you beat the hounds past that point thataway. Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else. You'd be feeding them maybe, holding out a piece of rabbit in your hand and the animal would revert—bite your hand clean off . . . All testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred. (p. 174)



Morrison's complex characterization not only suggests that it is possible that slavery could create a condition where the enslaved black mother protects her children as if she were an "animal"; but she is clearly also suggesting the beast that lives within the black mother is the beast that also resides within the white slave holder. Not only are the members of white society metaphorically represented as inhuman beings, they are also characterized as beasts with violent contagious venom that ultimately begins to reside within the nature of blacks. As Barbara Johnson (1989) says, this recognition of "the white man within" acknowledges "the ineradicable trace of Western culture within Afro-American culture" (p. 42). Within this context, the black female existential dilemma becomes complicated by white oppression and the state of human bondage, and therefore inseparable from it. When Paul D reflects on the nature of blacks and whites he confirms this notion:

White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside.

But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them everyone. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse that even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin. (Morrison, 2004, p. 232)

Morrison is suggesting that violence, torture and the act of horror is an inherent quality of whites of a slaveholding society and acts committed by blacks that resemble this are

apparent because of what whites have done. Although much of the animal metaphors highlight Sethe's maternal instinct, Morrison (1992) is clear that one cannot fully talk about the dehumanization of racist oppression without talking about its effect on the oppressor. "It seems both poignant and striking how avoided and unanalyzed is the effect of racist inflection on the subject . . . [E]qually valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters" (pp. 11–12). This sentiment echoes what Jacobs expresses about slavery's impact decades earlier. "I can testify from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched" (p. 498).

What further complicates Sethe's maternal existential dilemma is the path she chooses to keep her children safe. The murder of Sethe's "crawling already?" baby is a response to the absurdity of slavery. Initially it seems that Sethe is satisfied with her "rough choice." Because of the circumstances, it is a choice that Baby Suggs says she could "not approve or condemn" (Morrison, 2004, p. 210). Sethe does not regret what she has done; she did the most that she could do to ensure the safety of her children. When Paul D questions her about Stamp Paid's claim that she murdered her baby girl, Sethe explains, "I stopped him," she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (p. 191). This use of safety in death further constitutes Sethe's death-bound maternal subjectivity, and her children's non-existence becomes a component of her choices. Hence, death is the ultimate freedom for

an enslaved mother or her children. In a sense, she is successful. Schoolteacher has no use for her now. He remarks,

The three (now four—because she'd had the one coming when she cut) pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one—the woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked besides having at least ten breeding years left the whole lot was lost now. (Morrison, 2004, p. 173)

When an enslaved mother ensures that her child does not live the experience of enslavement by killing her, she is grasping at a freedom ultimately tainted by oppression. Sethe explains that she killed her baby because if she lived, there was something “far worse” for her to experience as a slave:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you . . . so bad you couldn't like yourself. . . [S]o bad you forgot who you were . . . she could never let that happen to her own . . . No undreamable dream about whether . . . a gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughter's thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon. (Morrison, 2004, pp. 293–294)

It is Sethe's own experiences of being “dirtied” by slavery that drive her strong will to prevent the same sexual violation, abuse, and “undreamable” brutalization from happening to her “best thing.” To her there is no other choice. Slavery was not an option for Sethe's child. “If I have to choose—well, it's not even a choice” (Morrison, 2004, p. 54).

What is equally important about Sethe's act of infanticide is how Morrison posits it as an act of mother love. The nature of the murder symbolizes the nurturing act of "thick love." Paul D's response to Sethe's confession of murdering her own daughter explains the composite of the love that is too thick as he labels it:

Sethe talked about love like any other woman . . . but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. . . . [M]ore important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him. (Morrison, 2004, p. 191)

Paul D's thoughts reflect the immensely profound possibilities of an enslaved mother's love that is sullied by oppression. It reveals the maternal power that is capable of defying the danger slavery brings to a child by ending that child's life. Sethe claimed her children—dead or alive—and this act is the ultimate advance of a mother's love that is "too thick." JanMohamed (2005) adds that this act of infanticide, "that is fueled by undeniable maternal love, raises that aporetic structure of the death-bound-subject to its excruciatingly painful and profoundly illuminating climax" (p. 4). In an interview with Marsha Darling in 1988, Morrison discusses what it meant for an enslaved mother to lay any claim to her children:

Under those theatrical circumstances of slavery, if you made that claim, an unheard-of claim, which is that you are the mother of these children—that's an outrageous claim for a slave woman. She just *became* a mother, which is becoming a human being in a situation which is earnestly dependent on your not being one. That's who she is. So to claim responsibility for children, to say something about what happens to them means that you claim all of it, not part of it. (as cited in Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 252)

In *Beloved*, Morrison's motifs of milk and blood represent the substance of the thick love that an enslaved mother can have for her children. We see the presence of milk in the novel—a definite conductor of life for Sethe.

“I had milk,” she said. “I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. . . . Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. All I know was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. . . . Nobody had her milk but me.” (p. 19)

Sethe finds agency in being able to nurse her child. The mother's milk is a lifeline throughout the text that can quite easily symbolize Sethe's ability to give life and death to her child.

In much of women's writing “milk is the symbol for the essence of mother love” . . . the taking of breast milk . . . signifies the appropriation and commodification of slave women's motherlove. (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 129)

Sethe's breast milk is violently extracted (by schoolteacher's nephews) and over the period of her long journey out of captivity, the milk is almost spoiled. Additionally, parallel to the milk, is the symbolic red blood that is prevalent in the novel. Most important is the “oily blood” that is shed from the “crawling -already?” baby after Sethe almost decapitates her with a hand saw. Morrison describes what Sethe tries to make Beloved understand about her decision to kill her baby:

[W]hat 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; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life. (Morrison, 2004, p. 293)

The “crawling-already?” baby then becomes Sethe’s sacrifice. As blood is traditionally symbolic of cleansing (as evidenced in Christianity with the blood of Jesus that can wash away sins) and innocence, Sethe refers to her child in this way: “Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean” (Morrison, 2004, p. 294). She sheds the cleansing innocent blood to remove her child from the filthy and degrading world of slavery. It represents the “paradoxical theme of losing innocence to achieve ‘higher innocence’” (Otten, 1989, p. 81). Sethe’s infanticide of her baby daughter is a sacrificial death. The innocent blood that Sethe sheds as her child’s mother is a testament to the ways in which nurture and innocence, mother and child, can be restructured as the conduits for an act of breathtakingly dreadful “thick” love. No other act can “match in horror Sethe’s slitting of her daughter’s throat and near smashing of her newborn child. Yet . . . Sethe acts out of a profound and unrelenting love” (Otten, 1989, p. 81). When the red and white—the blood and the milk—run together, the two life-giving fluids make pink—symbolic color of love. We see this strong symbolism when Baby Suggs tries to find a way to get Sethe to let go of the baby she has just killed:

“It’s time to nurse your youngest,” she said, Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go.

Baby Suggs shook her head. “One at a time,” she said and traded the living for the dead, which she carried into the keeping room. When she came back, Sethe was aiming a bloody nipple into the baby’s mouth. Baby Suggs slammed her fist on the table and shouted, “Clean up! Clean yourself up!”

They fought then. Like rivals over the heart of the loved, they fought. Each struggling for the nursing child. Baby Suggs lost when she slipped in a red

puddle and fell. So Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister. (p. 177)

It is no wonder then that baby Suggs dies thinking about “pink” and Sethe exchanges her body and her oppressed mind for a “pinkish” headstone for her nearly decapitated baby that reads BELOVED.

The black woman's absurdly oppressive environment may have forced her to behave in different ways to protect her children and herself. “[F]or Black people, the philosophical problem is not whether one exists or not, but how to collectively resist a white supremacist world of absurdity where one is degraded, marginalized, humiliated, oppressed and brutalized” (Haymes, 2001, p. 132). This “world of absurdity” may have also forced her to act in the face of constant threat of death and the loss of children, but her actions inadvertently confirmed her humanity. Jacobs' narrative is concerned with the quest for freedom through choice while Morrison investigates the nature of actions that confirm and negate the animalistic nature that whites attributed to blacks during slavery.

The courage and intelligence Sethe discovers through her mothering recalls that expressed by Harriet Jacobs in the slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Both Sethe and Harriet interpret their maternal love as a powerful and empowering stance of resistance. (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 132)

Although their agency is restricted, it is available, and both Linda and Sethe do choose—to act for themselves and their children—to press up and against a system that seeks to smother them.

**CHAPTER V**  
**CONSEQUENCES OF A VICTIM'S ACTIONS IN JACOBS AND MORRISON**

Beyond the mountains, there are more mountains. (qtd. in Gordon, 2000)

The actions of Sethe and Linda exemplify the existential conflict of a black mother's maternal subjectivity under the oppression of slavery. What these two mothers show us about black motherhood during that time, can tell us much about current black maternal subjectivity. In Chapter III, I provided a detailed record of the absurd environment found in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (2002/1861) and *Beloved* (2004). The settings accurately portray the reality of life for black mothers in America less than two centuries ago. I suggest that both Harriet Jacobs and Toni Morrison describe life for black mothers within a white slaveholding society as a living hell. Chapter IV addressed the ways in which these mothers responded to the absurdity they faced, and how their actions—decisions made under a system of oppression—involved harming or abandoning their own children to free them. By deciding what would be the fate of their children, Linda and Sethe resisted slavery's assertion that they could not claim their children's lives. This established for them a certain degree of freedom. In this chapter, I examine the connection between human freedom and human fallibility as evidenced in these two texts. Although, Linda and Sethe exercise freedom in their actions, with freedom comes responsibility. Despite the reality of their enslavement and



victimization, neither Linda nor Sethe were exempt from the consequences of their actions or the ramifications of their decisions.

We see the complexity of motherhood articulated in both *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Beloved* as the (black) mother constructs her decisions about her children around her own moral codes within a powerful (white) society that follows differing interpretations of right and wrong. Linda Brent tells her readers of the dilemma enslaved mothers faced: “The mother of slaves is very watchful. She knows there is no security for her children. After they have entered their teens, she lives in daily expectation of trouble” (p. 292). Linda and Sethe make their existential decisions within the conditions of their enslavement to make a better life for their children. As we exist, even in the worst possible conditions, we must make choices. One can choose good in the face of evil, and one can live by her own moral code. Sethe and Linda both exemplify the struggle with what it meant to exist authentically under a system of oppression. Yet their actions produced suffering. Sethe and Linda feel the pain of exercising their freedom as enslaved maternal subjects. To be autonomous is as Rutherford (2011) says to be “self-determined: one’s judgments are causally the result of facts about who one is essentially, as opposed to facts about the circumstances in which one finds oneself” (p. 532). Sethe and Linda claim their children despite the prerogative of immoral laws. Their freedom rests in this fact, not actual emancipation.

Both Linda and Sethe become fully autonomous beings when they realize that they are not what the world says. Yet Linda and Sethe experience anguish as they determine that they are no longer going to be slaves. Because their life and the lives of

their children are always already in an oppressive environment, every move, every decision they make or think about making is in response to, or deeply influenced by, dominant white meanings and projections. As a result, the black woman's choices as a mother and the consequences that spring from them constitute their existential predicament. There is a freedom in claiming, but there is also a price to pay.

### **Linda's Price**

The black woman's angst is deeply connected to her ways of affirming humanity and motherhood in the midst of dominant white meanings, and the intricacies of Linda's plan to free her children reflect the complexity of "the existential predicament created by human bondage" (Haymes, 2001, p. 138). The chapter in Harriet Jacobs's narrative that describes the details of her hiding place—ironically entitled "A loophole of retreat"—shows the deep existential dilemma that Linda faced as an enslaved black mother as she shares her struggle in the quest for liberation. In her seven year confinement in the attic, Linda's challenge was "to prevent the slave's painful existence from turning into despair, and thus the slave giving up to the point of indifference to life itself" (Haymes, 2011, p. 143). Linda reflects, "O, those long, gloomy days, with no object for my eye to rest upon, and no thoughts to occupy my mind, except the dreary past and the uncertain future!" (p. 532). Her feelings of angst derive from her existential predicament. Linda experiences her own freedom when she realizes that she has choice, and the freedom of choice produces anxiety or angst because those choices come with consequences. "Anguish is a struggle against making decisions that are constitutive of responsibility for

the self . . . responsibility is borne (in deciding or not), for the struggle itself makes the denied more apparent” (Gordon, 2000, p. 46). As an enslaved mother, Linda was

thrown into a process of imagining h[er]self beyond h[er] condition. [S]he became aware that there was nothing *inside h[er]* that precluded reaching beyond h[er] circumstance. H[er] self became, as Sartre would put it, a project. [S]he faced h[er]self in existential anguish. (Gordon, 2000, p. 51)

Linda experienced angst, for example, as a black mother choosing to resist oppressive circumstances. Although limited, her freedom therefore remains a condition of every action. The complexity of Linda’s angst stems from her fear of white consequences.

Linda speaks of feeling “powerless” and she admits to her “gloomy, monotonous existence,” but asks “what will not a mother do for her children?” (Jacobs, 2002/1861, p. 593)

The price of Linda’s freedom is twofold. Not only has she compromised her health by living in a coffin-like space for seven years, but she has also compromised the relationship with her children by essentially abandoning them. This confirms the close connection between freedom and responsibility.

The autonomous person does not merely withhold assent from the value judgments of others. Beyond this, she must be capable of determining value for herself. This marks the transformation that makes possible a new kind of ‘responsibility’—a responsibility for one’s self. (Rutherford, 2011, p. 526)

If freedom means being liberated from the control of white slave-owners, and not only being physically free, but also being able to lay claim to your children’s lives, then responsibility for Linda lies in the sacrifice of her body, and her relationship with her

children. Linda's story reflects the cost of freedom for enslaved black mothers. As Stephanie Li (2010) suggests, "Her astounding creation of options while a bondswoman do not represent freedom as we conventionally understand the term, but they do make her an agent of choice" (p. 6).

The reality of Linda's method of grasping at an autonomous life is that her body underwent years of physical abuse from living in such a small cramped space.

Brent continually reminds us . . . that she also suffers a confinement of the body that is tortuous: enduring sickness, painful insect bites, extremes of heat and cold, and frostbite, she has to accept that her limbs might never recover from their imprisonment. (Gunning, 1996, p. 148)

Her shelter barely shielded her body from the elements and she had very limited use of her limbs. After her escape to the North, "My limbs were benumbed by inaction, and the cold filled them with cramp. I had a very painful sensation of coldness in my head; even my face and tongue stiffened, and I lost the power of speech" (p. 576). It is hard to imagine living day by day in darkness with little air and no room to move for seven years. Her seven year torment was so bad that Linda admits, "With all my detestation of Dr. Flint, I could hardly wish him a worse punishment, either in this world or that which is to come, than to suffer what I suffered in one single summer" (p. 575). Jacobs's suffering was bound up in the pain she experienced in that garret. It created an almost permanent disability to her body and it also abused her inner spirit.

I HARDLY expect that the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years. But it is a fact; and to me a sad one, even now; for

my body still suffers from the effects of that long imprisonment, to say nothing of my soul. (p. 605)

To contradict the immorality of a slave society is a painful decision that puts Linda's life in conflict. The conflict derives from Linda's knowledge of her own maternal autonomy in opposition to what others claimed about her life. Linda's suffocation is metaphorically her knowledge of the absence of options available to her. Although she has done nothing wrong, it is Dr. Flint who is "out in the free air, while I, guiltless of crime, was pent up in here, as the only means of avoiding the cruelties the laws allowed him to inflict upon me!" (p. 575). As Gunning (1996) remarks, "Her articulation of bodily torture in the performance of maternal duty becomes a plea for a new construction of maternal power that includes black women" (p. 148). Jacobs choose to use her body in this sense as a weapon of resistance to slavery, and she uses the physical pain that she experiences to become an autonomous individual and give meaning and value to her life and the life of her children. "The human experience of pain is intricately bound up with the quest for meaning, legitimacy, and understanding. Human pain in other words, is not simply suffered, we are always compelled to make sense of it, in which case human pain is also a subjective experience" (Haymes, 2000, p. 145).

Another price of Linda's maternal autonomy is the time she spends away from her children in order to free them from slavery. She has not only hid from Dr. Flint, but also from her children. So that Flint does not find her, no one is to know where Linda is hiding except her grandmother and her Uncle Phillip. When she decides to go into hiding, she is hoping that Dr. Flint will think that she has runaway to the North and that

he will sell her children. Linda figures that their father, Mr. Sands, will buy them and emancipate them. As long as Dr. Flint had possession of her, she was still his property and so were her children. But if Flint thought that he had lost her, he would sell her children, for as Linda explained, "he was hard pressed for money." And so, Mr. Sands offered "eight hundred for the two children" (p. 577). Dr. Flint accepted the offer to sell the children, but did not know who was purchasing them. After the sale, Mr. Sands sent the children to live with Linda's grandmother. However, while Linda lived in her small space her children were still not free. Although they lived with her grandmother and she was able to watch over them from the tiny hole she made in the garret, they were owned by their father who had not yet emancipated them. She then learns that Flint has contrived a new way to still have a hold on Linda and her children. Mr. Sands tells Harriet's grandmother: "Dr. Flint boasts that they are still in his power. He says they were his daughter's property, and as she was not of age when they were sold, the contract is not legally binding" (p. 603).

And so, as year after year passes, Linda spends day and night away from her children. She is not able to talk to them or console them when they need it. On one occasion, a dog bites Linda's son and she feels the extreme anguish of her absence in not being able to protect him.

One day the screams of a child nerved me with strength to crawl to my peeping-hole, and I saw my son covered with blood. A fierce dog, usually kept chained, had seized and bitten him. A doctor was sent for, and I heard the groans and screams of my child while the wounds were being sewed up. O, what torture to a mother's heart, to listen to this and be unable to go to him! (p. 553)

Her inability to provide a mother's protection is also revealed through her daughter's sufferings. Ellen is eventually sent to live in the North with Mr. Sand's relatives. Yet, while Ellen is in the hands of Mr. Sands' relatives she is victimized in the same way that Linda was as a teenage girl. Mr. Thorne was an alcoholic who made Ellen buy liquor for him and who dirtied her mind in the same way that Flint had done Linda. Brent explains,

She was always desirous not to add to my troubles more than she could help, and I did not discover till years afterwards that Mr. Thorne's intemperance was not the only annoyance she suffered from him. Though he professed too much gratitude to my grandmother to injure any of her descendants, he had poured vile language into the ears of her innocent great-grandchild. (p. 626)

Brent's metaphoric description of the exchange between Throne and Ellen exactly mirrors those she used earlier in describing Dr. Flint's attempts to seduce her. Although the impulse for Linda to become absent is for the sake of her children, she still has to worry about her daughter's well-being in the care of others. Before Ellen is sent North, Linda reveals herself to her daughter. Afterwards, she finds that Ellen is not well taken care of. She has not been to school as promised and when she is reunited with her Linda observes, "She had changed a good deal in the two years since I parted from her. Signs of neglect could be discerned by eyes less observing than a mother's" (p. 625). Linda later explains the reality of the consequences she must face for abandoning her children.

O, how it tried my heart to send her away, so young, alone, among strangers! Without a mother's love to shelter her from the storms of life; almost without memory of a mother! I doubted whether she and Benny would have for me the natural affection that children feel for a parent. (p. 544)

When she gets to the North Linda suffers because of the time she has spent away from her children. She is not able to protect them in the traditional sense. In leaving her children, she misses out on several years of their lives.

Linda also realizes that after running away to freedom in the North, that the freedom she seeks is still a distant reality for her and her children. The last part of her narrative involves the focus on her own freedom. She strategizes and fights for her children's freedom and is not concerned with her own until it becomes clear that the only way to emancipate her children is to emancipate herself.

I was impatient to go to work and earn money, that I might change the uncertain position of my children. Mr. Sands had not kept his promise to emancipate them. I had also been deceived about Ellen. What security had I with regard to Benjamin? I felt that I had none . . . In order to protect my children, it was necessary that I should own myself. (p. 592)

Having been owned by others, Linda has secured her own legal freedom and that of her children. Afterwards, she reminds us that her struggle has not completely vanished. "The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own." She struggles to provide for them financially and "remains excluded from the domain of the home, and the sphere within which womanhood and motherhood were defined" (Carby, as cited in Ernest, 1996, p. 182).

Linda not only has to contend for the safety and well-being of her family, but she also has to grapple with northern racism and the onset of the Fugitive Slave Law. As a part of her new adaptation to northern life in the ambiguously free society, Linda cites



various encounters that involved racism. She realizes the reality of the lasting effects of slavery—economical destitution and racism that persists in the free states of the North.

In concluding her critique, Brent refuses to validate the freedom offered to her in the North, but instead problematizes this freedom . . . Such characterizations of Brent's experiences as essentially repetitions of slave life, despite the shift in region, demonstrate the narrative's active critique of the 'freedom' offered to blacks by the North. (Gunning, 1996, p. 151)

Freedom for a formerly enslaved black mother is not "free." "We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the North; and though that . . . is not saying a great deal" (Jacobs, 2002/1861, p. 664).

Although Linda's responsibilities cancel out any interest in her own freedom, she does find agency in her identity as a black mother. Linda acknowledges that the life she now has is "a vast improvement in my condition" (p. 664), she chooses to place value on her own life only by acting and making meaning for herself as a mother. When the whole of society does not believe she can or should be free, she proves them wrong. "Something is achieved through achieving what is deemed an impossibility, a feat against nature. Something ontological is achieved when black people . . . do that which supposedly cannot be done" (Gordon, 2000, p. 52). As such, Linda claims her own existence as a mother.

Although she has overcome one struggle there are many more that lie ahead. She is not yet who she can become. This is an ongoing issue for black mothers in particular who reside under a system of white oppression. "Identity . . . emerges from struggle, but

a subsequent struggle emerges over identity itself. This is the hallmark of existential struggles” (Gordon, 2000, p. 55).

### **Sethe’s Price**

Sethe’s choice to free her children from slavery by ending their life moves her from the status of a slave to an autonomous individual with choice. By choosing to “claim her own freedom” (Morrison, 2004, p. xvii) in this way, she is liberated from the perils of white morality. The moral code of whites in a slaveholding society conflicted with Sethe’s own moral code as a black mother. The definition of freedom to Sethe, like Linda, is the safety of her children. Sethe states, “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (Morrison, 2004, p. 191). If she could not be sure that they would safe, away from the abuse and dehumanization by whites, then she thinks she would have to end their lives. If her children were slaves, that meant she could not protect them, and she boldly exclaims, “If I have to choose—well, it’s not even a choice” (Morrison, 2004, p. 52). Sethe clearly believes that slavery for her children is not an acceptable option—to a great degree it is a null and void concept. She has decided that slavery will no longer exist. In the lives of her children, even as an enslaved mother, Sethe had the freedom to choose what was “not even a choice.” Yet the society in which she lived denied alternatives, or other ways of being. As Gordon (2000) explains, “A condition of one’s freedom is that one is able to choose. Yet, choosing and having options are not identical: choices may work in accordance with options, but one may choose what is not a *live* option” (p. 76). In choosing against the limited alternatives society gave her Sethe puts herself in conflict with the rest of the world.

If a set of options is considered necessary for social well-being in a society, then trouble begins when and where such options are not available to all members of the society . . . In a world where I only have two options, but everyone else has three, it is highly likely that my choices will exceed my options more quickly than would others' . . .

Eventually, it becomes clear that to make more than two choices, I will need to expand my options. But to do so would put me in conflict with a world that has only given me two options. In effect, then, to live like everyone else places me in a situation of conflict. (Gordon, 2000, pp. 86–87)

In her present environment, she and her children could only be slaves—the only option available to her was for her children to be owned by “schoolteacher” or some other white slave-owner. Unacceptable and deplorable conditions were what the world offered Sethe and instead she chose murder.

Sethe had a taste of freedom and experienced the feeling of being a mother outside of slavery. After running away from the Sweet Home plantation, she meets up with her children that she sent ahead. There, she arrives in Ohio to her mother-in-law’s home with a newborn baby and a newfound lease on life. Her reunion with them was a heartfelt moment.

When her sleepy boys and crawling-already? girl were brought in, it didn’t matter whether it was real or not. Sethe lay in bed under, around, over among but especially with them all. The little girl dribbled clear spit into her face, and Sethe’s laugh of delight was so loud the crawling-already? baby blinked. Buglar and Howard played with her ugly feet, after daring each other to be the first to touch them. She kept kissing them. She kissed the backs of their necks, the tops of their heads and the centers of their palms, and it was the boys who decided enough was enough when she lifted their shirts to kiss their tight round bellies. (Morrison, 2004, p. 108)

For the first time, Sethe felt what it was really like to freely love her children. Before then, as a slave, she was not familiar with this feeling. As she explains 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. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. (Morrison, 2004, p. 188)

For 28 days, Sethe felt the potential to be herself. She began to seriously understand what she had not had as a slave; what was even more important than physical freedom was the ability to be able to claim who she was. “Bit by bit . . . she claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (Morrison, 2004, p. 109).

As Robert Birt explains, “In the context of a social existence free of oppression, alienation and immiseration, the striving for identity could become an exuberant expression of the joy of existence in a liberated life that is an open field of possibilities” (Birt, 1997, p. 206). Before her escape, Sethe has a general naïveté about the nature of her condition and of whites in a slaveholding society. She has a trusting spirit and believes in the goodness of people. She has an expectation of decency because of the kindness she received from her former master, Mr. Garner before he died and before Schoolteacher took over the Sweet Home plantation. We learn that “Once, long ago, she was soft, trusting” (Morrison, 2004, p. 220). But it is not until Schoolteacher arrives that she learns the cruel and inhumane conditions that were possible for her and her children—“that anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind” (Morrison, 2004, p. 293). After she suffers tremendous abuse and later lives 28

days of freedom in Baby Suggs's home with her children, she understands much more about their condition and what she will and will not accept for her children.

It is in that moment of consciousness—that brief experience of almost being free to love—that Sethe determines that she will no longer be a slave mother to slave children. She admits, “That’s a selfish pleasure I never had before. 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, 2004, p. 190). When she sees Schoolteacher coming to collect her and her children she thinks “No. No. Nonono. Nonono” (Morrison, 2004, p. 190); this is the onset of her liberated consciousness. “The authentic consciousness of the oppressed is an expanding consciousness which comprehends the necessity to abolish oppression” (Birt, 1997, p. 211). She has made a choice despite the absence of option, to reject the “image of [her]self which the slaveowner has painted, to reject the conditions which the slaveowner created, to reject [her] own existence, to ‘reject’ [her]self as a slave” (Birt, 1997, p. 211). Otherwise she would be a slave mother with no claim to her slave children. Without action she would dehumanize herself and succumb to the “deformed consciousness . . . manifest” in oppressed people who see their blight as permanent or “inevitable” (Birt, 1997, p. 206). Not to suggest that those who did not act against their condition as slaves “logically” believed their condition as slaves, but it was people like Sethe who must have felt “in my bones that I am without courage so long as I do not try to escape or engage in some act of resistance” (Gordon, 2000, p. 47). Slavery’s harsh and morally ambiguous reality frames Sethe’s, just like Jacobs’s, existential predicament through the demanding responsibility of a mother’s liberation.

Although Sethe legislates choice and determines her children's fate by successfully keeping them from slavery, she suffers in anguish as a condition of her action. Sartre (1957) explains the connection between anguish and choice in this way:

In making a decision [one] can not help having a certain anguish. All leaders know this anguish. That doesn't keep them from acting; on the contrary, it is the very conditions of their action. For it implies that they envisage a number of possibilities, and when they choose one, they realize that it has value only because it is chosen. (as cited in Marino, 2004, p. 348)

Both Linda and Sethe are forced to choose between a life of slavery for their children or the devastating consequences that are born from deciding to act against it. As Sethe acknowledges in hindsight of her decision, "I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something . . . it cost too much!" (Morrison, 2004, p. 16). Morrison intentionally creates Sethe as a character who "cannot evade the consequences of choice" (Otten, 1989, p. 83). Otten (1989) also acknowledges that many of Morrison's characters "convicted of their humanity in a world of competing values where 'good' and 'evil' constantly shift . . . the characters all seek equilibrium, struggling to exist in creative tension with their own dark sides" (p. 98). The novel is constructed so that as we see Sethe's life unfold, we must understand not only her plight as an enslaved mother, but also the terms and conditions of the human right to freedom of choice. Sethe's grappling with her own responsibility in taking the life of her child is a prominent example of the ways in which we "must own not only our intentions, our goals, but also their consequences—our actions—which may not have been consistent with the intentions and values they sprang from" (Darling, 1988, p. 246). One component of Sethe's

responsibility is that she must live with the damaged relationship she now has with her children. Similar to Linda in *Incidents*, slavery directly and indirectly destroyed any possibility that a mother could have a normal relationship with her children. In making the decision to liberate them, these mothers must also accept that life with their children will never be the same.

In the scholarship and criticism of *Beloved*, much attention is given to what is existentially called the “Misery” in the novel—the moment at which Sethe takes a handsaw and murders her crawling baby. We must also remember that Sethe is only successful in killing her oldest baby girl, but she attempts to kill all four of her children. The consequence of murdering the crawling baby is manifest in Beloved’s arrival as a ghost in the flesh to 124 Bluestone has been analyzed in many scholarly contributions since the publication of the text (I will also offer my own critique later), yet there are also consequences born of the violent harm inflicted on her other children as well who remain among the living. At the time at which she determines that she must kill her children, Sethe begins with her two oldest boys Howard and Buglar. She first attempts to kill her two oldest sons by butchering them in the head. Sethe’s attack left the two brothers bleeding and “lying open-eyed in the sawdust” (Morrison, 2004, p. 174). The two boys become a symbol of Sethe’s “thick love,” and she ultimately suffers consequences for what she did to them. After the attack, both Howard and Buglar show visible signs of the effects of their mother’s violence towards them. Howard and Buglar “wouldn’t let go each other’s hands. Played that way: stayed that way especially in their sleep” (Morrison, 2004, p. 214). They are afraid of Sethe. She recalls that after what she had done

“Neither Howard nor Buglar would let me near them, not even to touch their hair” (p. 214). The two brothers hold on to each other for dear life. Because of what Sethe has done to them, they cannot hold on to her. They cannot trust Sethe to keep them safe when ironically that was her initial intention. Paul D observes this after hearing about the incident, “It occurred to him that what she wanted for her children was exactly what was missing in 124: safety” (p. 191). Eventually Howard and Buglar leave.

There was a time when she scanned the fields every morning and every evening for her boys. When she stood at the open window, unmindful of flies, her head cocked to her left shoulder, her eyes searching to the right for them . . . Little by little she stopped and their thirteen-year-old faces faded completely into their baby ones, which came to her only in sleep . . . she saw them sometimes in beautiful trees, their little legs barely visible in the leaves. Sometimes they ran along the railroad track laughing, too loud, apparently, to hear her because they never did turn around. (Morrison, 2004, p. 45)

Unsure if their mother will harm them again, Sethe’s two sons run away. Denver, their sister, said,

She missed killing my brothers and they knew it. They told me die-witch! stories to show me the way to do it if I ever needed to. Maybe it was getting that close to dying that made them want to fight the War. That’s what they told me they were going to do. I guess they rather be around killing men than killing women. (Morrison, 2004, p. 240)

Howard and Buglar abandon Sethe and the life she chose for them. Although they were no longer enslaved—school teacher determined after the incident that “there was nothing there to claim” (Morrison, 2004, p. 175)—they cannot be satisfied living with a woman like Sethe—a mother with “something in her that makes it all right to kill her own” (p. 242).



Sethe not only loses her two sons but she also loses the trust of her youngest daughter Denver. Denver has a particularly significant role in the novel. She is the baby that Sethe is pregnant with as she travels on foot to flee the Sweet home plantation. She is the “charmed child” (Morrison, 2004, p. 48) born on the road to freedom. As the only living and present child Sethe has left, Denver receives all the love and protection that Sethe can give. Sethe attempts to provide a safe haven for Denver and vows to shield her at all costs. She explains this to Paul D when he attempts to reprimand Denver for talking back “I can’t hear a word against her. I’ll chastise her. You leave her alone” (Morrison, 2004, p. 52).

Denver was also taken to the shed to be murdered by Sethe. She was just a newborn baby when Sethe attempted to kill her before the slave catchers took her away. The scene was unimaginable: “She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time”; Denver would have also died had Stamp Paid not “ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arc of its mother’s swing” (Morrison, 2004, p. 173). As an infant possibly less than two months old Denver survived her mother’s attack and continued to live with her at 124 Bluestone. As an older child, Denver suffers physically and mentally as a result of her mother’s actions. For a long time Denver loses the ability to hear after her friend asked her if her mother “[got] locked away for murder” (Morrison, 2004, p. 121).

When she did muster the courage to ask Nelson Lord’s question, she could not hear Sethe’s answer . . . nor anything at all thereafter. For two years she walked in silence too solid for penetration . . . for two years she heard nothing at all. (Morrison, 2004, p. 119)

Denver went deaf rather than hear the truth about Sethe's "rough choice." Denver is also overweight and just as isolated as her mother has become. She is socially inept, only finding company in a gathering of overarching trees where she spends the great majority of her time. "Denver stayed in her emerald closet as long as she could, lonely as a mountain and almost as big" (Morrison, 2004, p. 121). Despite this, in the end Denver actually becomes the heroine of the novel, taking great aims to leave the house and go get help for her mother who has been consumed by guilt and the demands Beloved imposes on her.

Denver continues within Sethe's web of ambiguous mother love, but Denver does not trust her.

I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it . . . All the time, I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me too. (Morrison, 2004, p. 240)

Sethe chooses not to acknowledge what her actions have done to Denver. She was too distracted see the harm she had caused. Paul D calls Sethe's intentions into question:

'Yeah. It didn't work, did it? Did it work?' he asked.

'It worked', she said.

'How? Your boys gone you don't know where. One girl dead, the other won't leave the yard. How did it work?'

'They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em.'

'Maybe there's worse'

‘It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that.’ (Morrison, 2004, p. 192)

Sethe’s ways of knowing are influenced by her oppression, and so, she reacts and responds through her relationship with Denver and her brothers. O’Reilly (2004) adds that, as we see in much of Morrison’s writings, “mothering is a culturally determined experience” (p. 31). The way a mother cares for or loves her children is largely based on the context of her situation and the social norms of the time.

Slave culture vehemently denied black children their basic humanity and actively prohibited slave mothers from loving their children and being attentive to them. Under such historical circumstances it was both dangerous, as Paul D. claimed, and almost . . . difficult ‘to love your children proper.’ (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 129)

It was not until Sethe saw what it was like to love under normal conditions that she acted in the way that she did. “Sethe stands at the center of moral ambiguity. The truth remains the paradox. . . . Either she would violate her love . . . or offend the moral code” (Otten, 1989, p. 90). Essentially, Sethe’s choice jeopardized any possibility for a relationship (if such was possible) with Denver, and Denver’s mistrust and fear of her mother is a consequence of Sethe’s decision.

Perhaps the most poignant component of Sethe’s choice to kill is the haunting of the baby ghost. “If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign . . . that tells you a haunting is taking place” (A. Gordon, 2008a, p. 8). The “powerful ghost” that occupies 124 Bluestone is a blatant sign of the crime that Sethe committed against her child. In Morrison (2004), the house is “palsied by the

baby's fury at having its throat cut" (p. 6) and its presence is known by all occupants to be the baby girl. When *Beloved* opens, herself, Baby Suggs, Denver, and a very spiteful and ornery ghost occupy Sethe's home. The ghost is one that Sethe describes as "sad" (p. 10), but that Denver describes as "lonely and rebuked" (p. 17). When Paul D first enters the home he felt the immense presence of the ghost "Walking through it, a wave of grief soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry" (p. 11). This sadness perhaps describes not only the ghost but also the circumstances upon which the ghost arrived. The baby also becomes a representation of slavery's harshness and the ambiguous consequences of a slave mother's love. Avery Gordon (2008a) explains,

The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost . . . is one form by which something lost or barely visible . . . makes itself known or apparent to us. (p. 8)

The ghost has been an active presence in the house that Sethe has learned to live with.

As many scholars have noted, the ghost is a supernatural symbol of Sethe's murdered daughter who has come into the house, upset, and demanding her mother's attention. Yet what also deserves some observation is the way in which Sethe channels and or fuels the ghost's presence. She feels an acceptable unease with the ghost. She operates from an understanding that is both constitutive of her maternal love and also her guilt. We find this same mentality carry over to her acceptance of *Beloved* and ultimately one that consumes Sethe almost completely. However, while the ghost is still a ghost and has not yet manifest itself as flesh, we find that much of how it operates feeds from the approval and at times the collusion of Sethe's psyche.

The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition. (A. Gordon, 2008a, p. 8)

The haunting is not only a spirit but also an active demonstration of Sethe's guilt about killing her daughter.

In consideration of Sethe's dilemma, environment and choices it seems that what is haunting the entire family is at once a ghost and also a product of Sethe's revived, powerful and unnerving angst—Sethe's own existential ghost. Here angst is the “struggle against making decisions that are constitutive of responsibility for the self” (Gordon, 2000, p. 46). Like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Beloved* shows the ways in which a black mother's angst operates, grows and transforms under a system of racial and gendered oppression.

Certainly, the anguish of black maternity emerges as a central issue in African American literature . . . A number of nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century black women writers—notably Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* 1861), portray both the pathos of mother-child separations within slavery and the free black mother's desperate anxiety about her children's welfare in an inimical society. (Dawkins, 2010, p. 224)

Sethe has not only lived 18 years with the memory of having killed her child, but is also living in isolation.

The twenty-eight days of having women friends, a mother-in-law, and all her children together; of being a part of a neighborhood; of, in fact, having neighbors at all to call her own—all that was long gone and would never come back. (Morrison, 2004, p. 202)

The fullness of her crime is met in her isolated mind. Together with the constant replay of the absurdity of her life as a slave, the angst born of her decision to murder her own children feeds Sethe's existential ghost. As Morrison (2004) has noted, slavery is a "formidable and pathless . . . terrain . . . inhabited by highly vocal ghosts" (p. xvii). On the one hand, Sethe does not feel guilty for what she has done. Sethe is a mother who kills unapologetically. On the other hand, she has already become completely consumed with her choice and the angst it has produced.

White slaveholders considered people to be property to be bought and sold. It was a system in which a wealthy white men believed that those who were enslaved were content with the absurdity of the culture in which they lived. Enslaved black mothers like Linda and Sethe had to live "as foreign captives and not members of [their] own society" (Haymes, 2001, p. 133) under moral codes that caused them moral harm—while simultaneously ascribing to their own principles of right and wrong in the midst of their suffering. Yet both mothers chose what they felt was best for their children in light of the dilemma they faced. They had to act. These mothers could've chosen to see their children sold off to a far away plantation, or raped and tortured by slaved owners with no way to protect them, but Linda and Sethe choose a different path. Despite the consequences, both mothers exemplify what it means to "understand human possibilities in the midst of dehumanizing realities" (Gordon, 2000, p. 44). In a letter to Edna Cheney written in (1867), Jacobs expresses her unwavering commitment to the choices she made: "There is no more need of hiding places to conceal slave Mothers. Yet it was little to

purchase the blessings of freedom. I could have worn this poor life out there to save my Children from the misery and degradation of Slavery.”

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: LITERATURE AND THE HEALING PEDAGOGY

In this chapter, I outline the consequences of slavery that are evident in our contemporary lives. I also present a healing pedagogy, one that I have enacted in the classroom; one that works through the pain and suffering associated with reading and analyzing texts such as *Incidents* and *Beloved*.

When I was a little girl, I was fascinated with my grandfather's work as a doctor, minister, missionary and as an author. I remember looking through the pages of one of his books and being in awe staring at the picture in it of his grandmother—a woman born into slavery. She would stare back at me, it seemed, with courageous, proud eyes, and I always wished that I could talk to her—just to hear what her voice sounded like and to ask her questions about her life. Later on as I continued my educational journey through middle and high school, I became very curious about race and identity mostly because I felt the impact of these two entities in my own life. I could never fully understand why people responded to me in certain ways or made assumptions about my character that were not necessarily true, but that fit the normative narrative inscribed on “black women.” When I came to college as an undergraduate student, I attended an historically black university. It was the first time that I had been around so many people of color at an educational institution. There were so many different kinds of black women with so



many different interests and personalities—I often describe it as a culture shock.

Everything that thought I knew about my own culture changed.

During the first semester of my freshmen year, I took a composition course with one of the most passionate, intelligent, black women that I had ever met. She made us think critically about race and write with purpose about how we felt. I wrote a paper about Nat Turner, the man who led the one of the biggest slave revolts in the American South, and it, along with that class, changed my life and put everything into perspective that I had been feeling for a long time. My educational experience since then has been nothing less than inspirational. For the first time in my life I learned about so many black women like Zora Neale Hurston, Gayle Jones, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Francis Watkins Harper, Anna Julia Cooper,—and the list goes on—who were writing fiction and non-fiction about race, gender and identity. I also learned more about the beginnings of racial oppression for black people in this country—the transatlantic slave trade. I was always so passionately and consistently interested in issues of race and the institution of black slavery in America. It occupied my thoughts a great majority of the time—I would even dream about that shameful time in our history. I often wondered why it wasn't until I came to college that I learned about so many details of race and slavery, but I was glad that I did. I knew that I wanted my life's work to be dedicated to studying, researching, writing, and teaching about the complexities of race and gender and that I wanted to contribute to the dismantling of oppression of black women that pervades our society in many instances today.

I decided that I wanted to explore the complexities of existence for black women under oppressive conditions and how they establish agency in the midst of degradation. I came across the book of my cousin Mary E. C. Drew (2010). My aunt told me that my cousin had written a book about one of our relatives, Dr. John Jefferson Smallwood, who started a school for blacks after the emancipation. I decided to purchase the book because I was curious about who my uncle was and what he had done. When I began reading *Divine Will and Restless Heart* however, I got more information than I could have ever imagined. I was completely amazed not only at Dr. Smallwood's life story, but also at our rich family history. I discovered a serious and deep connection to my own life and the beginnings of my passionate journey in education. The book revealed a shocking connection; as it turns out, the grandfather of Dr. John Smallwood was none other than Nat Turner! I could not believe that I was a direct descendant of Nat Turner, the initiator of the largest slave uprising in the South, and the same man who I wrote about during my freshmen year in college. As I did more reading, I learned that Nat Turner's mother, named Nancy, called Nancy of the Nile, was said to be an Afro-Israelite taken from the Nile river region of Africa and sold into slavery as a teenager. All of this was very surprising to me and I knew that I was fortunate to have encountered this information about my ancestry, as it is rare for black people to know anything about the history of their people. I was most intrigued by Nat Turner's mother who was said to be a descendant of African royalty, and who constantly resisted enslavement and was whipped as punishment on several occasions. What did this woman do to establish agency in her own life after being kidnaped and forced into slavery? What did she teach or instill in her

son that would make him want to murder so many men, women, and children in the name of freedom? I immediately began to take particular interest in not only Nat Turner's mother, but also his wife Cherry who had children by Nat Turner and her slave master, and his daughter Mary Eliza who had 11 children and a husband all of whom were sold into slavery. Mary Eliza's son, John Smallwood was taken from her 6 months after he was born—he would later grow up to start one of the first schools for emancipated blacks: he searched for and found his mother and moved her close to him (Drew, 2010).

All of this made me wonder about my connection to all of the women of my own family's lineage who were born or captured into slavery, or who had suffered hardships and oppression as black women, and how their decisions and reactions to their situation possibly has had an impact on me today. During a discussion with my aunt about my research interests and the new found information about our family's connection to Nat Turner, she said, "No wonder you have such a revolutionary spirit;" her statement made me think about the ways in which our roots and ancestral history has such a vast impact on how we formulate our own identity. I immediately felt that I needed to direct my research toward the revolutionary spirit of enslaved black mothers who experienced suffering and oppression while simultaneously establishing agency for and adding value to their lives in their own complex ways.

The reality is that blacks and whites have yet to fully deal with our history—the foundation of this country was built on the unpaid labor of kidnapped and enslaved Africans. Cornel West (2004) believes that our lack of resolve and inability to fully come

to terms with the suffering, guilt, and division that slavery produced is ultimately our all-encompassing weakness:

The American democratic experiment is unique in human history . . . because of our refusal to acknowledge the deeply racist and imperial roots of our democratic project. We are exceptional because of our denial of the antidemocratic foundation stones of American democracy. No other democratic nation revels so blatantly in such self-deceptive innocence, such self-paralyzing reluctance to confront the night-side of its own history.

This sentimental flight from history—or adolescent escape from painful truths about ourselves—means that even as we grow old, grow big, and grow powerful, we have yet to grow up. To confront the role of race and empire is to grapple with what we would like to avoid, but we avoid that confrontation at the risk of our democratic maturation. (p. 41)

What is further evident is that the trauma of slavery continues to trouble the lives of black mothers in America. We know that slavery separated mothers from their children. The suffering of displacement and familial severing has complicated the development of black identity for generations.

The children of enslaved mothers were by law born into slavery. Yet emancipation did not relieve the black community of slavery's residue. The stain of slavery was passed through generations. After the Civil War, many blacks moved to the North, the mid-West, and the West. After World War II, the sharecrop system was being phased out because of the invention of the "mechanical cotton picker" (Lemann, 1992, p. 70). Many southerners moved into cities like Chicago where the black population grew to half a million in twenty years (Lemann, 1992, p. 70). Because the white community there did not want black families moving into their neighborhoods (they resisted with riots, murder, and the enactment of restrictive laws), black people were forced to live in

“slums,” small substandard kitchenettes or “rickety three-story tenements . . . with heating plumbing, and insulation that were rudimentary at best and often completely nonfunctional” (p. 65). Black mothers who could not find work were forced to apply for public assistance, which quite often required that there be no man in the home. With this came many instances of black single mothers dependent on federal government assistance.

This created extreme poverty amongst black families. Daniel Moynihan and others attributed to the trend of asserting the black mother and her children as “ghetto” “slum dwellers,” “dependent,” and “dysfunctional.” Perhaps one of the most striking examples is the report filed with the U.S. Department of Labor by Daniel Moynihan et al. (1965) who stated that a large number of black women were never married,

divorced, separated, or have their husbands absent . . . nearly one-quarter of Negro births are now illegitimate . . . almost one-fourth of Negro families are headed by females [and] the breakdown of the Negro family has led to a startling increase in welfare dependency. (Moynihan, 1965, paras. 17–32)

Moynihan claimed that the black family was “highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown” (Moynihan, 1965, para. 10).

Angela Davis (1995) answered this report and many other studies that misrepresented the black mother. “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” aimed to debunk the myth of the black matriarch perpetuated by the Moynihan Report, and names slavery as the “historical inception” (p. 200) of the black woman’s oppression. Davis explains in detail the conditions surrounding the black woman’s economic and social circumstances under the institution of slavery and

thereafter. In regards to the domestic role of black women and their status as “matriarch”

Davis (1995) remarks

She was performing the only labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor. Precisely through performing the drudgery which has long been a central expression of the socially conditioned inferiority of women, the Black woman in chains could help to lay the foundation for some degree of autonomy . . . Even as she was suffering under her unique oppression as female, she was thrust into the center of the slave community. She was, therefore, essential to the survival of the community. (p. 205)

Davis provides an important connection between the black mother’s slave history and the so-called matriarchal role that white society misnames.

The stigma of the so-called dependent “welfare mother” further scarred black maternal identity. Reagan’s perpetuation of the myth of the “welfare mother” was central to his project of conservative restoration. Even as, historically, “black people were regularly charged more rent and paid lower wages than white people, and they were barred entirely from many good jobs” (Lemann, 1992, p. 65), the stigma of unwed welfare mothers, and dysfunctional black families, further inscribed social degradation of the black mother. As Hortense Spillers (2003) points out, this ideology is representative of a “class of symbolic paradigms that (1) inscribe ‘ethnicity’ as a scene of negation and (2) confirm the human body as a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements” (p. 205). The black mother has endured generations of abuse, has suffered while her children were bought and sold, and has performed an unbelievable amount of back-breaking labor without pay, to eventually be blamed for all of the problems that flow into her community thereafter. In this case the black mother’s choice

to be “dependent” was a strategy for the survival of her children and herself. Forgotten was the deplorable socio-economic conditions to which she was subjected before and after Emancipation, and how through it all she “made a way out of no way.”

Even in today’s society the ramifications of slavery on the black woman and her children are present. One can simply look at the Trayvon Martin case and see how a mother still suffers from the anti-black hatred against her children. She was afterwards failed by the American justice system that refused to acknowledge the murder of her son. In addition to Martin, there are thousands of young black children killed daily because of black on black crime, particularly in the same areas of Chicago where blacks migrated at the middle of the 20th century. As a result of slavery’s legacy, black mothers and their children were forced to live in cramped, hazardous conditions in which “law enforcement was casual because . . . police didn’t consider black-on-black crime to be a problem worth solving” (Lemann, 1992, p. 65). Today, the black mother still suffers because of the displacement, and violation of her children by a society that does not value their lives.

The Trayvon Martin case, and many other racially charged issues that surround or involve black mothers and their children, remind us that the ramifications of our slave past still cause unspeakable pain. Instances of racial violence break the hearts of black mothers today as they have done in the past.

Children’s children continue to remember or try to forget what happened to their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. Black mothers in America like myself, as descendants of kidnapped and enslaved African mothers, have an identity that is

shaped by the generational experience of oppression. Black families, just like mine, all across America have stories, texts and images that represent the impact of slavery.

My responses to these issues as they are presented in this dissertation are socially constructed and the meaning I derive from my research is in part determined by my own experiences. During much of the time that I was intensively writing and researching about this project, I was pregnant with, and gave birth to my third daughter. To have such a life changing event occurring at the same time as I am reading and researching about the suffering of enslaved black mothers and their unwavering commitment to the well being of their children's lives was more moving than words can express. There were late nights and very early mornings when I would be reading about the trauma and violence that many young children suffered at the hands of slaveholders and how their mothers had to witness the abuse of their children in agony, and it would bring me to tears. No sooner than that would my own infant girl cry out for me because she needed me, and I would have to abandon my work to go to her. In those moments rocking her back to sleep or consoling her, or even in those times when I would be helping my other daughters with their homework or braiding their hair, I would think of those enslaved black mothers—my ancestors—and be grateful. I embodied a spirit of gratitude because it was because of their decisions their actions, their methods of survival, that I am able to be with my own daughters today and to freely care for them and love them. It is because of the mothers who came before me that I am able to teach my daughters about what it means to make their lives meaningful and to tell them the history of the brave women who came before them.



It was those mothers' conscious decision to survive that allows me to stand in a classroom full of young black students today, and to engage with them in a quest of knowing who they are and in a search for healing. Throughout generations, these women gave a pedagogy of their own, one that is applicable in and out of the classroom. It is the pedagogy of the black mother—a pedagogy that embodies the black mother's ways of knowing: her survival epistemology. The pedagogy of the black mother is one that is taught inside and outside the classroom. As descendants of kidnapped Africans, we can learn from these women and their experiences. We can learn what is involved in embodying blackness and claiming one's own life.

When we encounter our slave past we are (consciously or unconsciously) reminded of the bodily harm and mental and psychological devastation on the enslaved black mothers and their ancestors. "The intrusive, uncontrollable repetition of cultural trauma, prevents the erasure of past trauma" (Schreiber, 2010, p. 40), and as Morrison acknowledges at the very end of *Beloved*, the story of slavery can become one that should not be told. The black interpretive community grapples with the predicament of keeping alive the slave narrative tradition and saving the legacy of those who lost so much and fought so hard so that future generations would have a better life. For black mothers in particular this includes a struggle in how to teach their children about the history of black women. I have also struggled with this in finding a way to educate my own children. Slavery's traumatic legacy remains a complex and ambivalent entity. Gayle Jones's *Corregidora* is a prime example. As Toni Morrison (2008) notes, Jones's novel is a "story that thought the unthinkable; that talked about the female requirements to 'make

generations' as an active, even violent political act" (p. 110). The trauma of slavery constantly interrupts the main character Ursa Corregidora's present life. Ursa's existential predicament lies in the fact that her memory of slavery through the stories of her grandmother and great grandmother shapes her identity as a black woman.

Whereas Ursa's foremothers were wholly enslaved to their diabolic Brazilian master, Ursa, though legally and socially free in the United States, is bound to . . . her foremothers in complex personal ways . . . she exhibits a form of psychological bondage that is profoundly crippling. (Li, 2010, p. 119)

Ursa Corregidora's agency over her own life is connected to her ancestor's suffering. Similarly, her great grandmother's agency is asserted on Corregidora's life. Her great grandmother's authority over Ursa's life comes from her requirement that Ursa "make generations" to keep the story of slavery alive. She gives meaning to the lives of her descendants by instilling in them a responsibility to have children, and to have them consistently re-enact the family's traumatic experience to keep it "living" and thus counteract the silencing attempted by the oppressors who would destroy evidence of slavery and who had attempted to destroy their very existence. This "living memory" that resides in the existence of all future generations of black women is forever connected to oppression. As we develop texts and representations of a slave past with a lens and perspective of the present we can move towards understanding. Although there is an urge or tendency to forget, dealing with the trauma aids in healing those wounds. As Kathleen Marks (2002) explains, the influence of a present lens on an analysis of the past has its own set of problems, but it is exactly an examination of those problems that makes this work of communal healing through rememory so important.

The dialogue between the present and the past, wherein the present dominates the discourse, is fraught with contradictions. That is, what was once useful and beloved to a culture may no longer be so.

Yet ‘. . . not avoiding problems and contradictions, but . . . examining them,’ . . . overcomes the conflicted character of memory itself. In this way, memory . . . is the ability to bring anything before the mind for inspection and questioning. (p. 133)

For me, one of the environments most conducive to the possibilities of healing traumatic experience is in the classroom. As both *Incidents* and *Beloved* are literary texts discussed and analyzed in academic environments that aim to deal with the most gripping realities of slavery in a group setting. For black students, the act of memory becomes imperative to their self-actualization and empowerment. Our collective memories help us understand and interpret the past to which we are all deeply connected. Toni Morrison (2008) writes that individual memories, recollections and imaginations can also permit access to the unwritten “interior life” (p. 74) of enslaved black women. The classroom experience of analyzing black women’s literature about slavery allows us the opportunity to “engage the same historical moment through the use of multiple intertexts and interpretations” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 110). As a classroom community utilizing slavery as a site of memory, we must make unusual connections with the text and each other to understand aspects such as choice, responsibility and agency—many universally human conditions that also represent the interior life of those living under the most oppressive state of bondage. This aids in allowing literature such as *Incidents* and *Beloved* to operate in “curative value as they seek to facilitate a holistic conversation about slavery” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 146).

Many of my students today come into my classroom lost—they continuously struggle with their black identity and their history as descendants of kidnapped Africans. It is their own existential dilemma of identifying as black and embracing the history of their ancestors that brings them to my classes distraught. In teaching at a Historically Black University (HBU), most if not all of my students are black. As we begin the semester learning about slavery many students have a hard time grappling with the material. Some students are angry. They don't want to learn any more about slavery than they think they already have because it makes them feel defeated. These are students who have only been educated about slavery through an interpretation that highlights that pain and suffering inflicted on black people. Many of them express not being able to watch or read about slavery because they will get mad at white people all over again. It is almost as if revisiting this time and place cuts again at a wound that has not healed. They have not experienced the “liberatory education” as bell hooks (1994) suggests that “is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit” (p. 19). These students have not learned about our slave history through a lens that embodies the agency of those who were captured. They have not been introduced to the pedagogy of the black mother—a curriculum rooted in love and survival and in standing on firm ground that one would not be determined no matter the circumstances.

These literary pieces allow the transformation of educational curricula into what I deem as a healing pedagogy—one in which the classroom setting offers a space where instructors and students alike can challenge traditional ways of knowing and develop the courage to face the pain and reject the fear of negotiating the gendered and racialized

spaces where trauma lies. As Caruth (1995) notes, healing through engaging in “trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site” (p. 10).

Black women’s writing in particular has the

power . . . to effect change and healing in the lives of readers . . . By allowing the reader to experience with the protagonists and the characters the process of analysis, synthesis, and reorientation necessary in their quest for freedom, these writers simulate a type of liberation for their readership by employing intertextuality as a strategy. (Mitchell, 2002, p. 146)

In my classrooms, the healing pedagogy that I employ allows the classroom audience as community to examine slavery, race and gender through a critical lens. Using multiple texts with similar yet distinctive ways of addressing these issues also provides the theoretical language needed, gives students an opportunity to name the oppression, and arms them with weapons to fight it. I have to encourage empowerment within and in spite of the oppressive conditions read in the texts and experienced by members of the classroom community by instigating alternative interpretations and offering critical pedagogies that encourage healing.

The majority of my students identifies as African-American or black, and are the descendants of the enslaved Americans much like those whose writings we study. As a result, the classroom material strikes an emotional nerve for many of us. In teaching at a historically black university, it has been my experience that most students have never dealt with the type material we cover; they have not studied much about the history and culture of black people, nor have they analyzed the details of slavery or read the narratives of enslaved black mothers. Time and time again I hear students share the same

sentiment—they wonder why they were never taught this material before. Many express their frustration with their past educational institutions that have failed to engage with curricula that “speaks to the lives of black students” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 83). In fact, it has been the vague and elusive nature of curricula in many of our schools that has left our students skeptical and mistrusting of our current educational systems. In my classroom, I am aware of the necessity to deal with this material, but I am also equally aware of the amount of care it takes to facilitate a classroom community with provokingly rich and traumatic literature as its subject matter. As we engage with the horrific acts mentioned, students sometimes give emotionally gripping responses. I’ve had students to cry, walk out of class, argue, and become silent. This exemplifies what Schreiber explains, “The confrontation with traumatic memory can restore places of safety and comfort as well as horror. Attempts to completely escape from trauma physically and mentally must include a reliving of the traumatic experience. Healing comes from modifying this repetition” (Schreiber, 2010, p. 40).

There is a level of difficulty in dealing with the subject matter. Slave narratives are eyewitness accounts of a peculiar time in American history in which human beings were degraded, controlled and oppressed. In their written narratives, formerly enslaved black men and women describe the suffering, brutality, and sexual violation they endured at the hands of the powerful white men. Although “the historical moment of slavery continues to haunt the American consciousness” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 3), it is difficult for members of American society to acknowledge or discuss our hellish past, and it is even more difficult to get students to read, analyze, and grapple with the messiness and

complexity of it all. Yet, I believe that as educators, we have a responsibility to deal with the traumatic and ugly side of the reality that informs who we are as Americans. In order for education to be transformative, we must be willing to confront the tough material; what goes on in the classroom should be an accurate reflection of what students experience in the world.

There is no easy way to deal with trauma in the classroom. Nor is there a “one size fits all” template for how to successfully navigate trauma—as the makeup of every classroom community is different. Within the classroom community, each member brings her own identity, experiences, and ideas about the world and her place in it. Huntington (1997) further suggests that for an exploration of gendered oppression, “different women of diverse racial, sexual, and other backgrounds may well have different localized experiences of the very same social and historical reality that issues in gender-based oppression(s)” (p. 186).

Further, each student has a different way of connecting to the material. A few semesters back, I had one student, a young black woman who felt that she could not deal with the material we studied. She expressed that, for her, it was very difficult to engage in a reading or analysis of slavery because everything about it made her upset or angry. Similar to my own original experience, she could only see oppression. It was not until we actually read stories like Harriet Jacobs’s, that of which she had never encountered, that she began to see beyond the oppression. The young woman later expressed to me that she loved the class because she learned about black women who did something about their condition of enslavement.

Similarly, I had a male student who took a course on African-American literature with me, and started off with a very combative attitude toward the material. He believed that the study of slavery was old news and that it was pointless to go back in history and continued to examine our slave past because it has nothing to do with his current presence in America today. He explained that he refused to be oppressed and would never claim what whites or anyone else believed about him. I explained to him that the stories we were going to read might give him a different perspective. Similar to my female student, his mind changed towards the end of the semester. It was scenes like Jacobs's hiding in a snake swamp and Douglass's fight with Covey that made him realize that blacks back then did not accept what white society believed about them. Examining the interiority of the lives of enslaved blacks through their narratives offers my students what they need to deal with racial oppression and their own identity as blacks in America today.

Introducing this material to students requires that I actively encourage discussion, personal testimony, and include anecdotes of others to give a sense of belonging. Yet as a facilitator of this engagement, I must be conscious of, and sensitive to, the trauma felt and the pain that comes from awareness. hooks (1994) also confesses, “. . . there can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in . . . learning . . .” (p. 43). It is my job as an instructor to carefully facilitate by recognizing this “discomfort” and responding appropriately. I must also be an active listener in class, and accurately interpret direct or indirect messages.



As we read, we also share stories and remember our ancestral past within the community. We perform rememory through various writing assignments and classroom activities that permit the “imaginative recovery” of the enslaved person’s life. Students make attempts to put themselves in that place and time, and subsequently analyze how the interior life and circumstances of the enslaved relates to their own individual and collective hardships and triumphs. Throughout the semester while reading the narratives, students create their own short stories, journal entries, and vernacular pieces individually and in groups. I suggest that these pedagogical strategies produce “a space for meeting and for understanding a different time and setting which, in turn, allows us to better understand our own” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 17).

As we begin in our journey looking at slavery through this lens, I start to see a transformation in them. What was once anger is now hope; what was once dismissed is now embraced. When black students begin to understand that their history in America does not only begin with a history of slavery, but a history of black men and women who chose and who survived, they can themselves transform the shaping of their own identity. In a conversation with one group of students, they admitted that they were struggling with one of the most damaging results of slavery and that is their lack of knowledge about where their people come from. Because of the massive amounts of people who were traded, bought and sold (this transaction also included name changes), great majorities of black people in America do not know their genealogy. Out of a class of 18 students (all black), not one could trace their ancestry past a few generations, and that was troubling for most of them. In teaching at an HBU, I can say that many of my

classes become a safe space for students to vent. When conversations like these emerge, as a teacher I deal with the hurt, anger and frustration by allowing the conversation to happen. With careful listening I allow the dialogue to just flow as one student to the next expresses his or her feelings.

In many cases I understand them because they are who I was. I was once that same frustrated black student who could not understand, and I want to help them heal just as I had. As bell hooks (1994) states, we must “teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students . . . if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13). I shared with them on this particular day what is indicative of the pedagogy of the black mother—that although we may not know where our ancestors came from we must begin to heal from what we do know. We know that no matter where they came from our ancestors were survivors. This must be true; otherwise we would not be here today. We are descendants of a people who survived centuries of oppression. We are children of mothers who decided not to die or runaway, but chose to remain and fight for their children and for the entire race. This is the pedagogy of the enslaved black mother—a survival epistemology that we must be proud of (Nsonwu, 2008). Through all of the emotional responses and reactions, I want my students to feel proud of survival. I want them to feel empowered by what their ancestors did so that the race would not die.

Ironically, the institution of slavery was dependent upon the survival of the black race and the continuation of the black mother as “breeder.” The enslaved black mother’s existential predicament was on the one hand a decision to keep the future away from

slavery—to not allow this lived experience to go on; and on the other hand, was a choice to live on and ensure the survival of their children and the race the best way they knew how. Paula Giddings (1984) tells of ex-slave Jane Blake who explained, “If all bond women had been of the same mind, how soon the institution could have vanished from the earth” (p. 46). Suicide was desirable to some black mothers to stop the pain and break free from slavery’s terror. Sethe admits, “My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma’am is” (Morrison, 2004, p. 238). Ultimately, as she exists and survives the conditions of slavery, the enslaved black mother’s consciousness is choosing to live, to be human, despite of her longing for death.

In my classes, we explore how enslaved black mothers survived “through such a living death” (Jacobs, 2002/1861, p. 500) of enslavement so that the race could continue to exist. My students’ understanding of the black mother’s survival epistemology falls right in line with my analysis of *Incidents* and *Beloved*. As I teach these texts, I offer a new interpretation of the enslaved black mother. We explore the interiority of their lives. The students encounter these women in a new and radical way. To study a different and new perspective of slavery gives them a sense of confirmation. They can now explore themselves in a different way. Not as descendants of victims but of brave, strong survivors. Together, *Beloved* and *Incidents* reflect the generational impact of slavery on black maternal identity. The use of intertextuality allows one to see the ways in which *Incidents* speaks to *Beloved* about the existential predicament of the enslaved black mother. Morrison has taken what Jacobs tells and reimagines that story in new ways. “In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it,

they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things” (Morrison, 2008, p. 70). Although Morrison’s fictional account is based on the incidents of Margaret Garner, *Beloved* is ultimately a story of an enslaved black mother’s sufferings. Through a contemporary lens, *Beloved* exemplifies the collection of memories ingrained in the consciousness of black maternal identity that may sometimes be violent and at other times very sad.

*Beloved* is a reflection of the times. Morrison’s reimagining of the interiority of enslaved black mothers like Harriet Jacobs represents the input of many black mothers who relive their own version of that time in history. It gives voice to the many occasions of silence experienced by black mothers. Ramadanovic (2001) states “having a voice depends not on what really happened but on understanding how the past and the present relate to each other” (p. 3). Reading and analyzing narratives of enslaved black mothers evoke experiences that speak to historical and contemporary race relations in America. We experience as a collective community the act of what Morrison coins as “re-memory.”

As Sethe confronts her past she is constantly haunted by her “re-memories.” Mitchell (2002) tells us, “Memory may be described as the selection of images; rememory is the replaying of selected images” (p. 12). Together we remember “images” of the traumatic and emancipatory nature of the lived experience of the enslaved to help us understand the history of oppressive forces in our society and how they continue to persist in varied forms. Schreiber (2010) explains, “Rememory represents the intrusive and repetitive aspects of the communal trauma of slavery. While rememory is disturbing,

it ironically provides the source for the communal sharing of trauma necessary to survive it” (p. 40). What Morrison and Jacobs ultimately show is that even though the tumultuous life of black mothers was seemingly unbearable, through shared experience—through a vocal or written expression of the intersubjective suffering of black mothers—there is a space for communal healing to occur. Jacobs attests to this by the constant inclusion of the community. Her story is not only hers. She is not the only woman hiding in the attic. And throughout her story of the struggle for the freedom of her children, she reveals the struggle of other black mothers who fought for their children. In *Beloved* Sethe’s ultimate salvation from the depth and pits of her despair and the consumption of her love and guilt resides in the community of 30 black women who shared the experience of slavery and loss of children:

They had no idea what they would do once they got there. They just started out, walked down Bluestone Road and came together at the agreed-upon time . . . then Ella hollered. Instantly the kneelers and standers joined her . . . For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Morrison, 2004, pp. 301–306)

Our classroom community needs to re interpret the interiority of the narrators to investigate our own “memories within” because it helps us to understand ourselves. We need to know “of the enslaved person’s sense of self, memory, history and culture” so that “reevaluation of representation as well as of the processes by which representations are constructed . . . can move readers into new and perhaps freer spaces” (Mitchell, 2002,

p. 11). Within this classroom space the discussions, exercises and interactions with each other guide us in moving the narratives of the enslaved from an image projected into memory, to text, a critical way to interpret from a contemporary lens. Morrison (2008) explains,

[I]f I'm looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write (which doesn't mean they didn't have); if I'm trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left—to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that I heard—then the approach that 's most productive and most trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from the image to the text. Not from the text to the image . . . the image comes first and tells me what the 'memory' is about. (pp. 72–73)

This way we are able, through the images we remember and the texts we create, to name, articulate and analyze dominant forces of oppression in order to move one step closer to eradicating them. Some members of our classroom community may have family history that they are able to trace directly to slavery. We hear about great-great aunts, grandmothers, grandfathers and uncles who were born into slavery and have contributed to the interpretive tradition of their family and the African American community. And we are there to listen. I also share along with my students because I am aware of the importance my inclusion in the community through personal reflection. bell hooks (1994) concurs and acknowledges “It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material” (p. 21). I bring photos and books about my ancestors who were once held as chattel in this country, and I reflect with my students about the personal impact of re reading and re interpreting the slave

narratives. We share open responses to the texts and acknowledge that we need others' thoughts in the class community to deal with the pain—this dialectic informs understanding in our classroom community.

Creating a classroom community that focuses on the lives and experiences of black people “provides a community of meaning in which members of a younger generation can see themselves as the current bearers of a history that represents an extraordinary story of physical as well as spiritual and social survival” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 82). The value and implications for teaching texts like *Incidents* and *Beloved* is that while at times the younger generation feels disconnected from America's history, they do feel the lasting impact of its oppressive foundation through the “whole new set of challenges and obstacles . . . compounded by the interconnected nature of various forms of oppression . . . involving racism, sexism, and classism” (Li, 2010, p. 119). In a symbolic sense, “the enemy has shifted from being an easily identified white slave owner to a whole range of characters” (Li, 2010, p. 121). This means that the analysis of early works like Jacobs's *Incidents* and contemporary texts like Morrison's *Beloved* help foster a sense of understanding about what has happened and its connection with what is happening today. It also provides a platform that they may not have otherwise existed to engage in re-memory and speak to the history from which it derives. It eradicates the boundary and the mandate of silence that many students may have felt elsewhere just like their predecessors that we cover. In a sense they get to participate in the creation of history. “History is a matter of memory: *who* [emphasis in original] is allowed to remember determines *what* is remembered. What is remembered as well as what is not

remembered informs and influences both the present and the future” (Mitchell, 2002, pp. 110).

An engagement therefore with black women’s literature on slavery through the lens of my version of black feminist existentialism “functions as a discourse of memory because the legacies of slavery continue to inform American culture, as well as racial and national identities, both individually and collectively” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 111). And so, our semester long journey becomes an exploratory, insightful, and at times tough voyage that we all share in together. Even those few members in the classroom community who do not identify as being black, women or mothers contribute by examining, based on their own experiences, how issues of race, privilege, oppression and power have or have not influenced their own lives. They provide a distinctive perspective through personal insight. What is created in this space is a spirit of individual and shared assumptions and interpretations that undeniably connect the classroom community.

This research will certainly impact my teaching in the future. As I plan to develop courses and pursue black feminist existential dimensions and the correlations between our slave past and our tumultuous present, I will aim to teach more people about “anonymous” women. I will use my platform to offer new interpretations about the level of thinking enslaved black mothers embodied in areas where the consciousness of these women is missing. Black feminist existentialism can speak to our past and allow us to reinterpret the perspectives on race and gender for an inclusion of black women’s ways of being in the world. Finally, I must believe in what I teach and feel that education and African-American literature can transform society for the better. As a black female



educator who is dedicated to social justice and eradicating oppressive power structures within our community, my purpose for educating “ is rooted in anti-racist struggle” (hooks, 1994, p. 2). My version of a black feminist existential framework ultimately helps us all understand more about our place in the world. In analyzing the nature of agency and responsibility for an enslaved black mother “is a lesson that a slave’s condition challenges all of us who fail to treasure our freedom” (Gordon, 2000, p. 45). The study, analysis and instruction of black feminist existential issues found in *Incidents* and *Beloved* “teach us about ourselves” and ultimately “what it means to be a human being” (p. 45). We are surveying texts that were silenced because of the era from which they derive along with texts that attempt to recover what was lost. Black feminist existential philosophies that interrogate and pedagogical strategies that heal help us find the agency of the oppressed that comprised the survival of the enslaved black mothers so evident in the literature and the African American interpretive tradition.

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