

THE MONSTER IN THE DARK:  
THE MONSTROUS MATERNAL AND ABJECT BLACK MOTHER IN TONI MORRISON'S  
*BELOVED*

by

Nikta Sadati

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“Nothing could be counted on in a world where even when you were a solution you were a problem.” (Toni Morrison, *Beloved*)

## INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is centred on Sethe, a mother and an escaped slave. Through a non-linear narrative, the novel follows Sethe through her traumatizing memories of Sweet Home – the plantation in which she was a slave – as well as 124, her new home after her escape. Set in 1856 pre-abolition America, *Beloved* follows the aftermath of Sethe's murder of her baby, Beloved, and the haunting of 124 by Beloved's ghost. Sethe's infanticide is revealed to the reader through a series of memories and stories from different neighbours of 124 and acquaintances of Sethe. Sethe is presented as a monstrous mother as she appears to her family and neighbours as detached from her maternal love and kinship. Throughout this essay, the research questions I will answer are the following: Who defines motherhood? How is grief exercised by a subject who is made abject? How is the concept of the monstrous maternal rooted in racial oppression? Sethe's murder of her child is seen as a cold and irrational act of violence; however, *Beloved*'s representation of black motherhood and slavery serves to complicate the narrative of the monstrous maternal.

I suggest a reading of Morrison's *Beloved* through the genre of horror in order to decode the categorization of the black mother – specifically Sethe – as both monster and abject. I suggest that it is Sethe's categorization as abject that leads to her monstrification. As Sethe is deemed “Other” due to her skin, history, and actions, she can then be made into a monster – the monstrification does not exist without the othering in the context of the black slave mother. In order to understand the monstrification of the black mother, one must first have a comprehensive definition of the word *monster*. Horror film scholar Noël Carroll defines monsters as “abnormal [...] disturbances of natural order” (Carroll 16). Carroll views monsters as “horrific creatures

[that] seem to be regarded not only as inconceivable but also as unclean and disgusting” (21).

Jeffrey Cohen elaborates this definition, offering his labelling of the monster as a “cultural body” that exists outside the boundaries of possibility (Cohen 12). Carroll’s and Cohen’s definitions of the monstrous as a disturbance of the natural order places the figure of the monster as “Other” to that which is considered natural and identifiable. Not only is the monster “Other,” but the monster’s otherness fuels a reaction of repulsion and distaste through descriptions such as “unclean” and “disgusting” (Carroll 21).

The categorization of the monster as a figure that lies outside of the identifiable and natural world order allows for the collaboration with Julia Kristeva’s definition of the *abject*. Kristeva, in “Approaching Abjection,” offers her definition of the abject as “something that is not a thing” (2) – lying outside of the boundaries of possibility and identity. Abjection is the act of othering a subject, therefore, the abject is the other that “disturbs identity, system, [and] order” (Creed 255). Kristeva touches on the connection between the abject and the maternal, expressing “the difficulty a mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm” (73). In her reading of Kristeva’s abject theory, Barbara Creed writes, “the concept of identity is a structure which depends on identification with another” (262). Following this logic, the identity of *mother* or *maternal* would depend on the authentication of this identity through her children. This serves as the main argument for the separation anxiety experienced by the mother in “refusing to relinquish her hold on her child” (Creed 254) – the fear of the loss of identity and, thus, abjection. Much like the earlier definitions of *monster* within the scope of the horror genre, the focus is the othering of the subject into the abject that is unidentifiable within the cultural realm of identification; therefore, the abject is considered revolting, disgusting, and horrific. Working with Kristeva’s theory of abjection and the cultural figure of the monster, this essay will analyze how the black mother is presented as abject, and thus, monstified in Morrison’s

*Beloved*. The figure of the monstrous maternal will be explored through race, slavery, infanticide, and the effects of trauma and grief.

While matrifocal scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Inderjit Grewal, and Ana Caroline Ribeiro have offered arguments connecting the racialization of the black mother with the monstrous maternal, my argument serves to bridge theories of horror and abject with the context of trauma and grief in the experiences of the slave mother. I utilize the scholarly work on the racial hierarchies of feminism in Collins's work, as well as the othering that lies intrinsically in the process of abjection laid out by Kristeva and Creed, in order to develop an argument that connects abject theory and grief with theories of the horrific and monstrous. The monster exists, as Cohen outlines, as a "cultural body" (12) much like the body of the mother that is defined, redefined, and limited through the methods and systems outlined in scholarly matrifocal literature. I analyze the "cultural body" of the mother through that of the monster of the horror genre in order to argue that the monstrous maternal is a result of the abjection of the black, slave mother from the cultural sphere that has been molded by oppression and slavery in order to favour the white, middle-to-upper class mother and woman. I believe research on the monstrous maternal is integral to criticizing the effects of this repression on motherhood and its monstrification. With my research I bring the scholarship that has been done on the monstrous maternal in horror cinema to modern American literature.

## BLACK MOTHERHOOD AND ENSLAVEMENT

Morrison reimagines a history of slavery, violence, and infanticide through the real-life inspiration for her main character Sethe, Margaret Garner. Garner's life was "marked by" slavery, and the infanticide that followed in her life was an act of refusal to her physical and mental entrapment as a slave woman (Grewal 63). Morrison's work places itself directly in the history of slavery, black motherhood, and violence, allowing for the analysis of the fiction to be

contextualized by the history of dehumanization that “marked” Garner’s life. The earliest histories of black women and slaves were not in books, but rather were passed down in oral traditions through generations (Sweeney 278). Morrison’s fictionalized story of haunting and horror serves as a narrative working to transform the oral traditions of survival and kinship of Afro-diasporic histories through the imaginative and open framework of fiction writing.

In *Beloved*, Morrison is able to complicate the narrative of the monstrous black mother through the use of horror tropes such as ghosts, hauntings, and grief. The abjection of Sethe is displayed through her traumatization at the hands of slavery, and the process with which Sethe’s transformation to monster occurs throughout the text mirrors the process through which the system of slavery dehumanizes black women. Through flashbacks and fragmentation, Morrison is able to reconstruct the narrative of black motherhood displaying the relationship between slavery and black kinship. Even after escape, the effects of the dehumanization of slavery upon Sethe are made apparent through her psychological and emotional *inability* to display an emotional attachment to her children and perform her maternal caretaking responsibilities. The only way in which Sethe can protect her child is through killing her baby before the slave owners can claim the child as their property. Ultimately, Morrison details the intricate and lasting ways in which slavery killed black motherhood and womanhood, exposing slavery as the true monster as well as the trauma that remains through the kinship bonds of black mothers and women.

The enslavement of black Americans followed the fundamental system that those enslaved were stripped of legal recognition, kinship, and the “ability to generate reproductive futurity” (Balon 141). Due to the stripping of human rights, slaves were treated as *other* and isolated from the human race, thus erasing their sentience to allow for violence upon their bodies. Language and the agency of definition is power in the hands of the white community, specifically the slave owners and masters, and the definition of *other* caged the slave into an

existence with no hope or potential for a future of freedom. The definition of *other* that began with the slave owners continued through centuries and tainted social ideologies on race and humanity so that “during the mid-1800s a persuasive knowledge system for differentiating African bodies from others had been established” (Lewis 200). The slave survived, not lived, in conditions that lacked the features and roles of dominant and normative kinship bonds, as the entrapment of slavery resulted in the “loss of the opportunity to build new kinship bonds” (Balon 141). As a result, the slave mother was “denied the very experience of motherhood” (O’Reilly 127), an example of which is apparent in the denial of maternal care to the black mother as she was “seldom allowed to nurse her babies and, when she was, they received milk only after the white babies had suckled” (129). The denial of maternal care resulted in the loss of the kinship bonds formed in the physical acts of nursing, as well as the emotional bonds that were destroyed in the physical separation between mother and child. The opportunity to build new kinship bonds were denied to the slave mother and her child. Slaves had no control over their own bodies and futures, or that of their children, as the slave owner remained in control of all bodily, emotional, and physical agency.

The violence of slavery was gendered as black women – along with having to perform similar labour to that of men – were burdened with “domestic duties” and were subject to “rape and other forms of sexual violence” (Maynard 282). Specifically, the slave mother experienced the destruction of her motherwork and motherhood through the dehumanization of her body as well as that of her child. I will be using the term *motherwork* in this essay to refer to maternal responsibilities and both physical and emotional caregiving performed by the racialized mother. In *Toni Morrison and Motherhood*, Andrea O’Reilly explains, “with the children who were not traded, sold, or killed, the slave woman had to struggle against her society’s denial of her maternal feelings, the definition of her children as property, and the master’s demand that her

time and energy be spent elsewhere in order to give them the love and attention they needed for basic survival” (128). The slave mother bearing children experienced “natal alienation, meaning that slaves were uprooted from the social structures and kinship ties of their natal society” (Balon 141), as well as the maternal care of their mothers. The unique separation experienced by slave mothers and their children resulted in slave women being “defined as not-mothers and thus denied the right to mother their own children. Viewed only as breeders, slave women were separated from their own children and forced to work the fields or on behalf of the master’s children” (O’Reilly 128). The slave mother’s maternal care and love was warped by the separation between the slave and their child, as well as the impossibility to fulfill the maternal duties with the expectations of labor from the slave owner.

The slave mother’s body – through the systems of power set by the slave owner and the law – was commodified and owned by the slave owner. Furthermore, children born from slave mothers became the “capital of slave owners” and “the property of her master” (Sweeney 280). This commodification fueled the gendered experience of enslavement as slave women were seen as being of higher financial value due to their ability to reproduce new slaves for their masters. The slave owner believed that “protecting enslaved mothers from severe corporal punishment and deadly labour conditions would encourage procreation” (Sweeney 280), and the slave mother often “appealed to her maternity as the sign of her womanhood” (Grewal 64). The slave woman had to appeal to her children for a sense of identity through her maternal relationship for, “as long as she could value herself as a mother, she could also call herself a woman” (64). Motherhood became an act of resistance as the black woman could see herself as an individual with agency and sentience through her maternity. As O’Reilly outlines, “In the sociohistorical context of slavery, a black woman who defines her selfhood through and in her mothering is resisting the ideological construction of the slave mother as breeder” (136). Despite this



resistance, slavery and its oppressive system thrives, and with the strict delegations of the black slave as “animalistic” and “Other,” the scrutiny that black mothers faced in their maternal actions and choices throughout late nineteenth and early twentieth century America led to their abjection and monstification.

## THE VILIFICATION OF THE BLACK MOTHER

For the purposes of this essay, I will be referring to the maternal experiences and responsibilities of maternal caretaking as *motherwork* – pulling from the definition and usage of motherwork that is defined in Collins’s “Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood.” Collins argues that the use of *motherwork* softens “the dichotomies in feminist theorizing about motherhood that posit rigid distinctions between private and public, family and work, the individual and the collective”; she writes, “racial ethnic women’s mothering and work experiences occur at the boundaries demarking these dualities” (59). The use of “motherwork” in this essay will refer to the maternal responsibilities of black mothers in association with their trauma of labour work and the experience of enslavement, as well as their emotional labour and work for financial stability after escape. Feminist theory, specifically in regard to motherhood, is “racially codified” (O’Reilly 4) as the expectations and definitions of motherlove within the context of feminist theory does not consider the history and trauma of the black mother in regard to the experience of slavery and oppression. These maternal expectations emerged with the popular ideology labeled “moral motherhood”; as O’Reilly defines, “the nineteenth-century ideology of moral motherhood put mothers on a pedestal and placed a halo over their heads. Mothers were by definition naturally pure, good, chaste, altruistic, and morally superior to men” (127-128). The expectations within the system of “moral motherhood” included an altruistic loyalty from mothers to their children and for women to exist and thrive within the “female” role of nurturer in the home while the patriarchal men work in the

public sphere (Collins 58). Moral motherhood favoured “white and middle-class women” (128), a dichotomy dissected by O’Reilly accordingly: “the white mother was worshipped on a pedestal as a Madonna, the slave mother was auctioned on a block as a breeder” (128). The systems of oppression have degraded black motherhood and separated black mothers from the possibility of fulfilling the expectations of motherhood placed unto them by the terms of feminist theory, outlined by white mothers and women.

The distinction between black motherhood and white motherhood finds its roots in slavery and the commodification of the maternal body and black child. The effects of this distinction carry over into the lives of slaves who escape, as well as black mothers following slavery abolition in America in 1865. While slavery has been legally abolished, the “monstrous presence of slavery has still not been wholly removed from American and Western culture, having transformed itself from physical to a more psychological method of control” (Grewal 74). The traumas of generations of violence and oppression resulted in the disempowerment and erasure of kinship bonds for black families, couples, and mothers with their children as, “while black motherhood has survived, it still continues to suffer at the hands of the dominant culture” (Grewal 74). The reconstruction of family structures and kinship bonds in post-abolition America was seen as an act of resistance to the dominant race as “black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects” (O’Reilly 10).

The social and legislative demonization of the black mother through terms such as the *matriarch* lead to the horrific motherhood displayed in Morrison’s characterization of Sethe’s infanticide. Black women’s inferiority was often “routed through allegations about their poor child-rearing practices” (Sweeney 285). The image of the *matriarch* being associated with that of the black woman aided in the hierarchies of race and gender that were considered “officially constructed” in 1965 with the publication of Daniel Moynihan’s report “The Negro Family –

the Case for National Action” (Ribeiro 70). Monynihan was an American sociologist who served as Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Lyndon B. Johnson, and his report focused on his analysis of the “disparities in income, education, and health between black and white families” (70). The controversy surrounding his report is rooted in his conclusion that “the social ills affecting the black population” were due to “the lack of a patriarchal structure modelling that of white families” (70). In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins articulates the oppression that black women face at the hands of oppressive ideological dimensions that “originated during the slave era” and permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable” (Collins 5). One of these ideologies that Collins is referring to is that of the *matriarch* which arose in post-bellum America out of stereotypes of the black mother as uncaring or negligent, and thus blamed by the white, dominant society for the social shortcomings of her children (Ribeiro 70). The black matriarch was seen as “too assertive, independent and used to bossing their husbands around” and were therefore “unfeminine” in their motherwork and womanhood. However, this categorization and judgment “fails to account for the socio-political processes that have left both black women and men excluded from the system” (70) – this system being that of the strict moralization of motherhood and the feminist theories that exclude black women and mothers.

Monynihan’s report fueled the racial divide between the scrutiny and judgment of maternal practices between black and white mothers – specifically in terms of punishment received for infanticide. “Narratives of white women’s delicacy or victimization not only helped procure lenient sentences for them but also helped create their binary opposite: the pathological black mother” (Sweeney 285) and these “lenient sentences” resulted in the same acts of infanticide being forgiven and empathized with when committed by a white mother, while

simultaneously resulting in imprisonment and demonization for the black mother. This dichotomy allowed for the emergence of what I have labeled the *monstrification* of the black mother. The black mother is defined as a monstrous creature in the face of the angelic and powerful white mother and is seen as horrifying in her detachment and negligence of her children. The effects of this monstrification on the psyche of the black mother and her inability to identify as woman and mother is “one of the most significant afterlives of slavery” (Sweeney 285). It is the system of slavery, including its manipulation and oppression of black women’s agency, that contextualizes Morrison’s portrayal of terror-filled motherhood and the hauntings of trauma and death in *Beloved*.

#### THE BLACK MOTHER AS ABJECT AND MONSTER

With the child serving as a “token” of the mother’s own “authentication” (Kristeva 73), the mother’s identification in the symbolic realm – the realm of language and identification – becomes dependent and vulnerable; this theory is further complicated by the racialized history and trauma of the black slave mother. As mentioned earlier, the slave is seen as less than human or “Other” which aligns them with Kristeva’s definition of the abject; however, Kristeva’s theory suggests that abjection occurs as a consequence of separation – in this context, a separation between the mother and the child. In terms of the slave’s identity, regardless of motherhood, they are seen as ‘Other’ and less than. The slave is not afforded individual autonomy and agency and is abject with or without children. “In opposition to the power of an objectifying slave system, the monstrous may be defined as the subjective voice of an African-American woman-mother” (Grewal 63); therefore, the act of resistance to the abjection of the African-American mother through the identification with their children further fuels their monstrification within the system of slavery that depends on the subjective voice to be heard for resistance.

Through the terms *abject* and *monster*, I will analyze Morrison's *Beloved* and its fictional representation of motherwork amidst the trauma and violence of the system of slavery in Southern America. *Beloved*'s main character, Sethe, is an escaped slave mother who is deemed monstrous and animalistic for her choice to kill her daughter Beloved. The haunting of her home, social scrutiny, and trauma that follows Sethe throughout the novel will be the focus of my analysis as I work to display the effects of slavery on the identification of the black woman and mother as monstrous, as well as the ultimately futile acts of resistance towards this identification from the slave mother. The monstrosity of Sethe's "choice" is a result of the social abjection of black female bodies and the traumas and actions of slave owners, as well as the lack of freedom of black mothers to perform motherwork and feel motherlove. Rather than Sethe's act of infanticide being a choice, the "monstrous" murder is an act of freedom and escape. While the act achieves an agency for Sethe over her children, it consequently results in the social scrutiny upon her actions as a free agent and human.

*Beloved* presents the black mother as abject to the system defining what is and isn't a "moral" mother, appropriate motherwork, and maternal love. Sethe's monstrous otherness and animalistic actions, accompanied by her apparent lack of remorse for her violent actions, distinctly position Sethe and her motherwork as abject and thus monstrous. The relationship between mother and daughter becomes intrinsically entangled with the trauma and history of slavery and the female body as commodity and a site of impossibility for futurity and freedom. While the black mother's body was considered a financial solution of sorts as her children were seen as financially beneficial for the slave owner – more bodies for labour – Sethe reflects, "Nothing could be counted on in a world where even when you were a solution you were a problem" (Morrison 302). The abjection and othering of the black mother persisted through her financial value as she was seen as a problem in her identification with womanhood and

motherhood. The monstrous maternal is presented as a product of slavery's degradation of the child and mother. Sethe's infanticide acts as a resistance towards the stripping of maternal care from the black mother; Sethe's ability to take the life of her own child is in fear and resistance towards the lack of future and death that she foresees for her child at the hands of slavery. Similarly, by materializing the past and keeping the dead black child alive throughout the novel, the haunting of 124 resists the erasure of the kinship and love between mother and child by bringing back to life what has died at the hands of the trauma and fear of slavery. The monstrous acts and hauntings that take place in *Beloved* are acts of resistance to the destruction of the black mother and child's future and experience of kinship and love.

#### THE GRIEF AND TRAUMA OF SLAVERY

*Beloved* offers a women-centred narrative, focused on the relationship between mother and daughter; however, an underlying relationship between the black mother and the trauma and grief of slavery is presented through the ghost of Sethe's home in 124. Morrison's novel is contextualized through experiences of grief, trauma, and loss as Sethe holds physical and psychological marks of the trauma she experienced in Sweet Home as a slave. When describing Sweet Home, Sethe reflects on the plantation as "the timeless place" (214). All time and order were lost to Sethe in Sweet Home as the place and the traumatic experiences attached to it become detached from reality. In that way, any memories and stories of Sweet Home are presented in a fragmentary style throughout the novel through the process of "rememory" (43). Sethe describes the process of rememory as "a thought picture" (43) that never dies; this description of memory as a flash of a picture can be compared to theories of intergenerational trauma and postmemory experienced by generations of communities that have experienced oppression. Sethe experiences her memories of Sweet Home in pieces as she reflects, "that's all you let yourself remember...she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe"

(Morrison 6). Sethe's fragmentary experiences of her memories and traumas in Sweet Home further emphasize the effects of the violence on her mental being through her refusal or inability to return to a linear narrative, in her memory, of that "timeless place."

It is revealed that Sethe's arrival in I24 is the result of her escape from Sweet Home and the fragmentary memories revealed about Sweet Home inform the reader of the traumatic experience of enslavement. Sethe describes being violated in Sweet Home in an incident where the slave owners physically assaulted her – "these boys came in there and took my milk" (19). Furthermore, she describes her relationship with her mother in Sweet Home, or lack thereof, as she expresses, "She must of nursed me two or three weeks – that's the way the other did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was" (72). What Sethe experienced in Sweet Home is a traumatic experience that is reoccurring in the greater system of slavery; "natal alienation" is the process through which slavers were "uprooted from the social structures and kinship ties of their natal society" (Balon 141) in order to begin their labour as slaves or be transferred to separate plantations from their mothers almost immediately after birth. Sethe is separated from her mother through the system of labour that disallowed slave mothers to nurse their children themselves. This traumatic experience results in a complication of identity and kinship ties between the mother and the child, as the slave mother has no control over their child's future – most times, the slave mother does not see her child grow into an adult.

Sethe's monstrous act results in a loss of a maternal relationship between child and mother and what follows is an experience of grief not only for the loss of life, but for the loss of the maternal bond and motherlove. However, due to the normalisation and strict law of this separation and the deterioration of kinship through the systems of slavery, Sethe's grief is translated into traumatic repression. Not only does she carry the emotional marks of her trauma, through her rememory, Sethe also has a scar on her back (18) that physically marks the effects of

the violence she experiences at Sweet Home. *Beloved*'s focus on motherhood and trauma displays how one experience informs the other, as Terry Paul Caesar describes in his work "Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," "consider motherhood and slavery as in fact convertible terms" (112). Therefore, the contextualization of Sethe's motherhood and maternal relationships in I24 in the trauma she experienced as a slave is integral to the complication of her monstrosity.

Within the context of Sethe's trauma in Sweet Home, the grief and trauma of the experience of enslavement and motherhood is carried over into her freedom from slavery through the haunting of I24. Morrison writes of Sethe in I24, "this was not a normal woman in a normal house" (49). I24 is a home filled with mothers and children – the home is first inhabited by Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, as well as Sethe's daughter Denver and her two sons. Sethe arrives and soon after her arrival, the ghost of her dead daughter, Beloved, appears and begins to haunt I24. At this point, the home is filled with three generations of black kinship; however, when the boys run away and Baby Suggs dies, the house is left with Sethe, Denver, and Beloved's ghost – this is where the present tense of the novel exists. In the introductory descriptions of I24 it is described as "barren" (Morrison 48) and "heavy" (65). The term "barren" can allude to the reproductive system of a woman in being incapable of producing offspring. The language of maternal reproductivity used to describe the grief and trauma that exist in I24 further emphasizes the intrinsic link between slavery and motherhood, and in this case, the horrific and motherhood. When the house is described later in terms of being "heavy," this implies that while the home is "barren" of motherlove, it is heavy and filled with grief and trauma of the past. When walking into I24, Paul D, another escaped slave from Sweet Home, describes "walking through [...] a wave of grief" –further emphasizing the heaviness of I24 with its constant connection to the past, and the bareness of I24 of any hope for futurity.



Sethe's constant connection to her past trauma and loss is materialized through the presence of the ghost of I24. By including a physical representation of a haunting past, Morrison works to fictionally represent the unimaginable and ever-present reminders of a past of oppression and violence that exists in the system of enslavement. I24 and its ghost serve as constant reminders of Sethe's dead daughter, Beloved, and the ghost is described as an "evil thing" and later as expressing a "baby's fury at having its throat cut" (6). The gravestone that Sethe purchases for Beloved, the symbol of grievance and loss in I24, marks the beginning of the haunting rather than the end of a presence, as Sethe describes, "as soon as I got the gravestone in place you made your presence known in the house" (217). Sethe's abnormal and supernatural experiences of grief and loss place her as "Other" to the socially acceptable and normalized experiences of loss and grief.

The traumatization and violence of Sethe's experience in slavery disallows her from the experience of the loss of kinship ties and relationships, as all relationships and feelings are denied from the slave. Sethe wonders, "would it be all right to go ahead and feel?" (46), emphasizing the history of slavery in which "slaves were forced to invest their human emotions and labor into kinship relations that were formally meaningless, the products of which belonged not to them but to their masters" (146). The slave's resistance to feeling or desire were forms of resisting the emotional manipulation and control of the slave masters. As a result, Sethe experiences the loss of agency over her feelings and her grief must be displayed as abject and outside of her body, through the presence of the ghost and I24. Her grief, much like her motherhood, is abject to her body and exists outside of her, detached from her inner feelings and desires that belong, within the system of slavery, to the slave owner.

#### THE POWER OF THE WHITE DEFINER

The black mother in grief is unrecognizable to the system of slavery within which black people are not to feel their own emotions and desires. This results in the grieving black mother to become abject within the symbolic realm of slavery – the definers are not able to cope with an undefinable being, and therefore, she becomes monstrous to their system of order. Sethe's monstrous maternity, emphasized by her act of infanticide and her maternal detachment from her children, is a result of the manipulation of language and naming. The power of definition belonged to the slave owner as "concepts of what is 'natural' and, therefore, what could be regarded as the truth belonged solely to the defining race" (Grewal 71). The language used to identify the "natural" against the "other" or the abject belongs to the race in power as, "definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined" (Morrison 225). With the power of language belonging to the white, slave-owners, all meaning and order of identification is ruled by the slave owners and the black mother loses all ability to identify as mother or woman.

Hierarchical social orders are set through these definitions and identifications as the slave owners are able to both "other" the slave, as well as position the slave lower in the hierarchical order than the dominant race. In an instance of reflection, Paul D remembers Mister the rooster in Sweet Home, "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister" (86). Paul D is placed lower than an animal in the hierarchy of the system of slavery. The animal has the agency to have a name that will remain with him through life and death as Mister will be remembered by his name after death and is able to identify with his own species. On the contrary, Paul D and the slaves at Sweet Home are not referred to or identified as human, but rather as "trespassers among the human race" (148). Furthermore, a majority of the men in Sweet Home are named different versions of the name Paul, signifying the unimportance and lack of individuality in their names and rather a collective identity of "Other."

Another instance of the power that the definers, or slave-owners, have over the identification and identity of black slaves is exemplified when schoolteacher – a teacher hired for the plantation on which Sethe is enslaved – defines Sethe through animal characteristics. Sethe overhears a conversation in which schoolteacher and his nephews are describing Sethe as he expresses, “I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (228). After overhearing this, Sethe questions Mrs. Garner on the meaning of the word characteristic, to which Mrs. Garner replies: “a characteristic is a feature. A thing that’s natural to a thing” (230). With schoolteacher’s description of Sethe, it is clear that she is not fully identified as human by the slaveowners and authorities on the plantation; rather, she exists as a monstrous half-human, half-animal creature – essentially, unidentifiable in the symbolic realm. This defines Sethe as abject to the human race and as horrific in her inability to be categorized, as Kristeva argues, “the abject confronts us [...] with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*” (72-73). Mrs. Garner’s use of the word “natural” further exemplifies the power of the slave owner over nature and the natural order of things. The power of language lies in its ability to define and erase identities and names. Through the language of the slave owners, what is ‘natural’ is able to be defined on their racist and oppressive terms and hierarchies. The power of the slave-owners to define the ‘natural’ transcends what is naturally evident and is able to transform and manipulate the human race to exclude black people entirely. This sovereign power results in the monstrification and dehumanization of black people and their agency, emotions, and actions. The power of the definers is a central theme in *Beloved* as it is the root of Sethe’s monstrous maternity and the horrific figures in the text; her vilification and violence derive from her initial identity that is bestowed upon her by the slave-owners at Sweet Home.

#### *BELOVED’S* HORRIFIC MONSTERS

The first instance of monstrosity and horror is introduced in the beginning of the novel with the ghost that haunts Sethe and Denver in I24. The haunting is described as “done by an evil thing looking for more” (Morrison 45); the ghost is described as a “baby” expressing her “spite” (15). The evil baby ghost that haunts I24 is the first monster of the novel, presented as a horrific and a supernatural existence beyond the realm of reality. While the novel deals with historical realities of slavery and oppression, the presence of the ghost shifts the novel’s world into one where monsters that exist within horror genres of literature and film are accepted as members of the world of reality and retellings of history. The description of the ghost as “evil” and spiteful automatically places the ghost in the position of monster as it is threatening and unwanted. With the ghost being the spirit of Sethe’s dead baby, Beloved, the ghost is intrinsically tied with Sethe’s past as she reflects, “as soon as I got the gravestone in place you made your presence known in the house” (217). The moment that Beloved’s death is materialized in the home through the purchase of the gravestone, her ghost came to life, and thus, her presence is never truly dead within the novel. Beloved is also posthumously named, marking her identification and existence as beginning in her death and haunting.

Not only is the ghost constantly accompanying Denver and Sethe in their home, its anger is passed onto those living in the house through the grief and heaviness, as Morrison writes, “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (42). The ghost is seen as a horrific presence that must be eliminated, connecting to the Kristevian definition of the abject as a corpse – “the most potent and immediate symbol of abjection. This physical embodiment of death confronts us with all that is unspeakable” (Kristeva 69). The ghost being a version of a corpse, as it is directly connected to the death of the baby and its immediate revival as a spiritual corpse, Kristeva argues that the corpse abject is “an irrefutable manifestation of mortality that must be permanently thrust aside in order to live” (69). When Paul D arrives in I24, he gets rid of the ghost through his male

presence of patriarchal power, “wrecking everything” and “screaming back at the screaming house” (22). Paul D “represents the possibility of change and regeneration in a way that is threatening to the ghost’s existence” (Balon 145); therefore, his terrified rejection of the abject monster momentarily stops the haunting of I24. Paul D’s detachment and rejection of the ghost emphasizes the ghost as a representation of grief and history for Sethe and Denver and yet, an “evil thing” that terrifies the people outside of Sethe’s maternal kinship.

Sethe is the second monster in the novel as she is presented as the detached and violent mother; however, her monstrosity is central to the novel’s exposure of the vilification of the black mother in slavery. Sethe’s resistance towards motherwork and maternal love is fueled by her belief that “motherlove was a killer” (155). In Sethe’s instance of displaying her motherlove, she murders her daughter in an effort to protect her from the history of slavery that Sethe endured in Sweet Home. Sethe is making a sacrifice of her daughter and expressing her maternal love, while simultaneously becoming a killer. In descriptions of the infanticide Morrison writes, “a [n-word] woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other,” (175) continuing, “how she 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” (185). In the picture painted of the murderous mother, her race is explicitly tied to her monstrosity through the racially derogatory word used to describe her.

Furthermore, there is a refusal to describe Sethe as a mother, rather, she is described as a “woman” and her child is described as “an infant” without a possessive pronoun – i.e., *her* child. This rhetoric of detachment and refusal to identify Sethe as the mother of her children emphasizes her abjection. Sethe is a woman covered in blood who has committed infanticide – not a mother who is protecting her child from the horrors of slavery – and this identification comes as a result of “schoolteacher’s perception of her as ‘Other’ [which] is in direct conflict

with her self perception as a ‘wife’ and mother” (Grewal 71). Furthermore, the descriptions of Sethe as flying and “snatching,” as well as her face as a “beak” and her hands like “claws,” serve to dehumanize her in describing her in terms of an animal. The animal characteristics used to describe her behaviour strip Sethe of human rationalization and identity, comparing her rather to a violent bird.

#### INFANTICIDE: THE MONSTROUS “CHOICE”

The first monstrification of Sethe is in the initial description of the infanticide and her vilification both in the moment of her violence and in its retellings in the community. Sethe’s infanticide lands her in the newspaper as Stamp Paid shows the clipping to Paul D (183) and he is petrified at her violence. Furthermore, Sethe is abandoned by a neighborhood that lives in terror of her and her home. When speaking of Sethe, the people around I24 reflect, “I ain’t got no friends take a handsaw to their own children” (221) and “the woman – something was wrong with her” (176). Sethe’s violence is unimaginable for the community in her neighborhood and for the onlookers; they can recognize something “wrong” with her, implying that something horrific exists within her that does not exist within a “normal” woman. This theory is emphasized by Denver’s fear of her own mother as she expresses, “Don’t love her too much. Don’t. Maybe it’s still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children” (243) continuing, “I spent all of my outside self loving Ma’am so she wouldn’t kill me” (245). Denver’s fear of her mother is different from that of the community around I24 as Denver identifies the “thing” that makes Sethe violent and monstrous as separate from Sethe’s body and spirit – it is a “thing” in and of itself that is “in her.” However, Denver’s fear still results in an emotional detachment from her mother by not loving her “too much” (243). Although altered, Denver’s monstrification of her mother’s motherlove fuels the image of Sethe’s monstrosity.

Denver's detachment from her mother and Sethe's detachment from her daughters, both dead and alive, emphasize the monstrous maternal; these separations, in life and death from Beloved, and emotionally from Denver, complicate Kristeva's theory that abjection happens at the moment of separation. Rather, Sethe's abjection occurs in her never-ending connection with her role as "matriarch" or monstrous mother that she is unable to separate from. The dead baby that haunts her and the "thing" in her that causes fear in her own kinship are inseparable from her identity within her community and family and are the root causes of her abjection. She is made other and terrifying because of all she carries with her through the trauma and grief of slavery and the behaviour she exhibits that is perceived as irrationally violent and monstrous.

Kristeva's connection between the abject and the human connection to the animal is further emphasized through the expectations placed on Sethe to behave like an animal as a black mother and woman. Schoolteacher's descriptions of Sethe as half-human and half-animal serve to exemplify the cycle through which black slaves are treated as animals and subhuman. After the infanticide, schoolteacher explains to his nephews, "just think – what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education" (176). Schoolteacher compares not only Sethe's physical being to that of an animal but also her mentality and rationality to that of a beaten horse. Ironically, he recognizes that Sethe's violence is a result of abuse, but in the very statement of acknowledgment of this cycle of violence, schoolteacher equates her to an animal he owns. Even after Sethe's physical freedom from slavery, when Paul D hears of Sethe's act of infanticide, he remarks, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (Morrison 194). Alluding to her animalistic behaviour, Paul D's shaming of Sethe and her infanticide through a connection between her and a four-legged animal fuels the gendered experience of slavery. Sethe notes of Paul D's comment, "How fast he had moved from his shame to hers" (194). Although Paul D himself has been

shamed through dehumanization and comparisons to animals, he does not hesitate to shame Sethe for her infanticide as something that cannot be considered human and is thus monstrous.

While Sethe's act of infanticide does aid her isolation from the white community and their standards of maternity, Sethe's monstrous maternity does not begin with her violent action. Sethe's monstrous maternity is a product of a system of oppression that expects violent behaviour from black women and mother and pushes black mothers to monstrosity. Black behaviour and reproduction were heavily policed "while leaving the sovereign power of slave owners relatively untouched" (Sweeney 281). One method of spreading the mindset of this policing and vilification was through the newspaper. In the post-bellum South, black women were vilified for their "poor child-rearing practices" and "stories of 'bad mothering' proliferated in Southern newspapers" (285). As early as the 1780s, "the media's vilification aided in consolidating the image of the reckless and terrible black woman" (285). In Morrison's novel, when Paul D is shown the newspaper clippings describing Sethe's infanticide, he expresses, "there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear" (183). Paul D expresses the norm of the Southern newspaper's portrayal of black people as "bad news" or stories that disturb.

Sarah Haley, in *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, clarifies the true oppression within this social construct of the black mother, arguing that black children only mattered to the state when they became reasons to punish black mothers (55-56) and I would add that black mothers only mattered to the state when they were being vilified to strengthen the dichotomy between black and white motherhood and humanity. The state's focus on black mothers as criminals and violent further emphasizes Haley's earlier argument that black children only mattered to the state when they became reasons to punish black mothers (55-56). The methods through which Sethe's act is vilified and monstrified reveal



a construction of the image of “the pathological black mother” (Sweeney 285) in order to raise the image of the sovereign and innocent white mother and woman. In creating a dichotomy between Sethe and the *good mother* or the *loving mother*, Sethe’s motherlove is denied as she is rejected from the symbolic realm of kinship in order to keep her as abject and monstrous.

When *Beloved* returns as a young woman in the novel, it is made apparent that Sethe and *Beloved* are one being and intrinsically connected; *Beloved* never existed or died as separate from Sethe and their monstrosity is shared. Sethe as a monstrous mother undoubtedly lends her monstrosity to a monstrous daughter and a relationship between the two that is formed on the basis of terror and violence. *Beloved* “imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way [...] it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who” (283). *Beloved*’s physical imitations of Sethe emphasize their connection as one being to the extent that Denver, Sethe’s own daughter, finds it difficult to differentiate between the two women. *Beloved* and Sethe’s physical and psychological connection is dramatized through their imitations and embodiments of one another in order to display the mother-daughter relationship of the black mother and her child.

The abjection of Sethe appears at the moment of connection rather than separation. Sethe cannot separate from *Beloved* as *Beloved* is her and she is *Beloved* – “mother and daughter are here, once again, two parts of the same being” (Caesar 116). Woman, mother, and child are interchangeable roles within the novel as categorically organized kinship roles are systemically established and practiced by the dominant race. Denver experiences the role of motherhood as she takes care of *Beloved*, washing her sheets and her underwear (Morrison 64), as Sethe is infantilized by *Beloved* as Denver describes, “*Beloved* bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child” (294). In Sethe’s abjection from the realm of order and normativity, the roles of mother, daughter, and woman in her home are fluid and interchangeable.

Sethe's home is abject from the rest of the outside world, much like Sethe is detached from normative experiences of womanhood and motherhood as she reflects, "there is no world outside my door" (217). "When Sethe locked the door, the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds" (235), therefore, the kinship roles and familial responsibilities that are experienced, as well as the motherlove that Sethe expresses through the trauma and grief in I24, exist within the world behind her "locked door" where the women are "free" in their expressions. It is when these actions are performed or exposed outside of her locked door that Sethe becomes a monstrous mother. Denver's monstrification of her mother begins after hearing of Sethe's violence outside of the home, Paul D finds out from a newspaper clipping, and the infanticide takes place outside of the inner home. Therefore, I24 is the only place wherein the women are free to experience a fluid motion of motherlove, daughterhood, and womanhood that is otherwise considered monstrous and inferior.

#### THE DENIAL OF BLACK MOTHERLOVE

Sethe's act of infanticide, as well as her emotional detachment from her children, fuels her image as a monstrous mother; however, *Beloved's* fragmentary revelations to Sethe's past with slavery and Sweet Home raise the question of whether Sethe ever had the chance to be a "good" mother. In describing her experiences of motherwork in Sweet Home, Sethe describes trying to take care of Denver as a baby while being forced to perform the labours of slavery. In an instance of trying to keep Denver away from flies in the field at Sweet Home, Sethe is swept away by the slave-masters and when she returns, flies had "settled all over" (Morrison 228) her baby's face. Not being able to fulfill her desired motherwork in order to protect and raise her child, her child's fate and future were taken from her control.

Even before birth, Sethe's children belonged to the Garners, the slave-owners at Sweet Home. Sethe's pregnant body is described as "property that reproduced itself without cost" (269)

and the slave-owners claim any born or unborn child as property. With the future of her children out of her control, the black mother's only sense of agency over her self-protection is to avoid emotional attachments in order to lessen the grief of a lost child. Sethe reflects on the dangers of emotional attachment as a slave mother as she notes, "For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous., especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. [...] when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one" (Morrison 54). Sethe's detachment from Denver and Beloved, exemplified in her monstrous motherlove in I24, is a result of her self-protection from the trauma and grief of losing her children. Sethe reflects, "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed" (Morrison 104), and it is the power and agency to dream or think of a future at all that is ultimately stripped from the slave. For the slave mother, it is not only the power to dream for herself, but to dream of a future with and for her children that is taken from her.

The physical as well as the emotional acts of motherlove were stripped from the black mother through slavery, resulting in altered or destroyed maternal relationships. Sethe describes not having enough milk or not knowing that milk was not the only form of nutrition for her children (187). What can be seen as negligence and vilified is rooted in a lack of opportunity or education in motherlove and the normative roles of maternal care, as well as a stripping of physical strength to perform motherwork. Sethe reflects, "there wasn't nobody. To talk to, I mean, [...] I wish I'd known more..." (188). The black slave mothers share a collective, generational trauma and loss of maternal identity and agency, therefore, there is no immediate familial community to learn maternal love and care. Due to the fact that Sethe "never knew" her own mother (140), she had no example of a black mother that is free to perform and accept maternal love and nurturing. Collins highlights the three struggles of "racial ethnic women" in gaining maternal empowerment, writing, "The struggle for control over their own bodies [...]"

getting to keep the children that are wanted [...] and the pervasive efforts by the dominant group to control their children's minds" (Collins 64-66). These three struggles towards empowerment are unique to the black mother, and thus, when the black mother is policed and scrutinized for her motherlove and motherwork, it is through a framework of language and ideals that, at its core, excludes the people it vilifies. When Sethe questions, "Could she have been a loving mother?" (Morrison 165), ultimately, the answer is that she never had the freedom, choice, space, or agency to be one.

## CONCLUSION

Every act of resistance in *Beloved* is perceived as monstrous and abject to the normative reality of human behaviour, as set out by the dominant race. Beloved's haunting and physical return to 124 are her acts of resistance to her murder at the hands of her mother as she returns in "spite," looking for "something" (Morrison 16) from Sethe. Furthermore, Sethe's infanticide is an act of refusal to the ultimate control of the slave owner over her child's future as Morrison writes, "She was trying to out-hurt the hurter" (276). Throughout the novel, Sethe refuses her pathological identity in the community – "Sethe had refused – and refused still" (296) – yet, slavery and its everlasting systems of manipulation and oppression prevail. The haunting of Beloved's ghost ends with Paul D's violent refusal of its presence. However, the ever-present haunting throughout the novel is that of the trauma, both physical and psychological, of slavery upon the black mother and family. Reflecting on the tensions of racial hierarchy, Morrison writes, "they had the weight of the whole race sitting there. [...] Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. [...] The more coloredpeople 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" (234). The jungle that white

people manifest in the identities of black people, alluding to their treatment as animals and violent creatures, creates monsters out of black people in their language and ideals. In this process, as black people are considered inferior to the dominant race within the hierarchies of legal and social worlds, the attempt to convince the slave owners of their humanity is enough to demean and destroy their self-identities.

*Beloved*'s largest and most powerful monster is the system of slavery that both creates and destroys the black monstrous maternal repeatedly through the manipulation of the figure of the black mother. Sethe's infanticide is an act of refusal and an attempt at re-possession of her maternal power; "If I hadn't killed her," Sethe justifies, "she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (Morrison 236). Sethe believes that death was waiting for Beloved whether she had killed her or not, but Beloved's death at the hands of the white people is something Sethe "could not bear to happen" (236), resulting in her committing the act herself. The community's social shunning of Sethe and her family as "crazy" (312) and her monstrification in the media emphasizes the dominant narrative of the black mother as a criminal posing as mother and woman.

The connection between infanticide and slavery is intrinsic as "infanticide has changed nothing. Slavery survives and reinstitutes itself totally. [...] the power of this system reappears like a ghost at a deeper level of more personal anguish" (Caesar 119). Alluding to the system as a "ghost," the haunting presence of slavery, even in Sethe's supposed freedom, presents itself as the creator and punisher of the monstrous maternal. By making Sethe and her motherlove abject, the system is able to remove all sentience and humanity from the black mother, ultimately stripping her of dreams and futurity. Isolated and alone in a heavy and haunted house, Sethe is trapped in a motherlove that is "killer" (Morrison 155) in its inescapable recognition as monstrous. The black mother remains the monster in the dark depths of a society run by the

frameworks and language defined and set out by the white people with “the screaming baboon living under their own white skin” (Morrison 234).

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