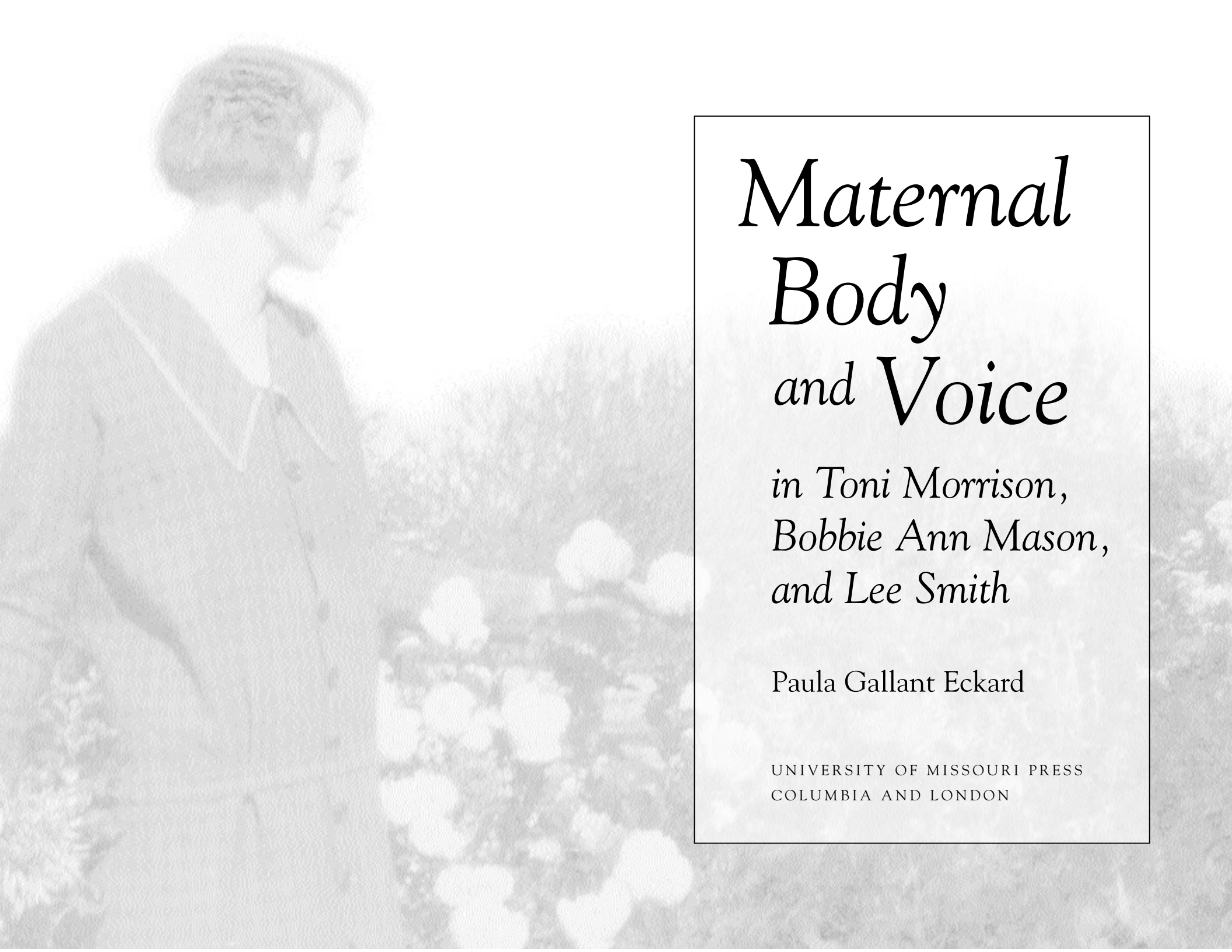


MATERNAL
BODY *and* VOICE
in TONI MORRISON,
BOBBIE ANN MASON,
and LEE SMITH



*Maternal
Body
and Voice*

*in Toni Morrison,
Bobbie Ann Mason,
and Lee Smith*

Paula Gallant Eckard

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI PRESS
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To my children, from whom I have learned so much.

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

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PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps it is their concern for "herstory" that draws me most to the

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

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

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Thanks also to friend, former colleague, and outstanding fiction writer Nanci Kincaid for allowing me to include her comments from interviews, lectures, and readings she has given.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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

Toni Morrison

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

Bobbie Ann Mason

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

Lee Smith

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

MATERNAL
BODY *and* VOICE
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BOBBIE ANN MASON,
and LEE SMITH

Introduction

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

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

In recent literary and theoretical texts, however, more substantial attention has been given to motherhood and to the physical, psychological, social, and cultural dynamics affecting the maternal experi-

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

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

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

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

The extraordinary sense of place that all three writers create in their works no doubt stems from the personal connections each has to a specific geographic region. Born in 1931, Toni Morrison grew up in Lorain, Ohio, leaving there at age seventeen to attend Howard University in Washington, D.C. Although she claims never to have "felt like an American or an Ohioan or even a Lorainite," she nonetheless evokes a strong sense of place in her novels, one that is suggestive of the small-town life she experienced while growing up. The Ohio communities that Morrison depicts in such novels as *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved* have autobiographical origins that con-

tribute substantially to "the details, the feeling, the mood" of the places she creates in her fiction. She admits to a tendency to focus on neighborhoods and communities, which in her own life provided "life-giving, very, very strong sustenance."

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

Born in 1940, Bobbie Ann Mason hails from western Kentucky, whose small towns and rural landscapes provide the settings for her short stories and novels. Rather than examining the South's troubled past, she explores the cultural changes at work in the contemporary South of the late twentieth century. The Kentucky towns and farms in her novels are in a state of flux, dramatically altered by the rise of suburban neighborhoods, shopping malls, and fast-food restaurants. Virginia Smith sees Mason's use of her home region in her fiction "as a metaphor for profound shifts in the contemporary social terrain and for a transient American culture."⁴ Unlike Morrison's characters, who must bear the burdens of the past, Mason's have difficulty contending with the present. They experience tumultuous changes in their personal lives—dysfunctional families, divorce, unemployment, illness—as their once-rural society gives way to mass culture. In many instances, the traditional moorings of family and community are lost, while the past seems irrelevant and largely unknown.

For Mason's female characters, these changes strike at the core of their identity as wives and mothers. Some are left perplexed and confused, unsure how to respond to the changes imposed upon them. Others adapt and survive. Whatever the case, Mason believes that her characters communicate "the familiarity of common experience" and

1
~Historical and Theoretical
Perspectives on Motherhood

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

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

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

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

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

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

Toni Morrison

An Overview

Toni Morrison's works are fantastic earthy realism. Deeply rooted in history and mythology, her work resonates with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. Primal in their essence, her characters come at you with the force and beauty of gushing water, seemingly fantastic, but as basic as the earth they stand on. They erupt, out of the world, sometimes gently, often with force and terror. Her work is sensuality combined with an intrigue that only a piercing intellect could create.

—Barbara Christian,
“The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison”

Barbara Christian's observations regarding Toni Morrison's extraordinary depictions of the real and the fantastic were written in 1980, at which point Morrison had published only three works—*The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Song of Solomon* (1977). Time has proven that Christian's assessment holds true for the rest of Morrison's oeuvre as well. From *The Bluest Eye* to *Paradise* (1998), Morrison has indeed infused her works with a “fantastic earthy realism” that grounds her characters in time and culture and connects them to larger, more mythic realms of experience.

This blending of myth and reality is an important element in Morrison's efforts in “evolving a mythology of black culture.” Morrison says she sees this mythology already existing in the music, folklore, and spiritual life of the African American community and in

2
~*The Bluest Eye*

THE INVERTED MATERNAL

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison subjects the maternal to grotesque inversion through the pregnancy of eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove. Pecola's tragedy reveals a cultural and personal devastation of astounding proportions. Moreover, her eventual descent into madness and silence comes to symbolize the split between body and voice that permeates the maternal throughout the novel. Rejected by her mother and raped by her father, Pecola gives birth prematurely to an infant whose death symbolizes her own failure to thrive. Her fervent desire for blue eyes adds yet another layer of complexity to her experience because it reveals that she is as much a victim of her culture as she is of familial abuse. The blue eyes, which in Pecola's mind would grant her beauty and acceptability, symbolize the blond-hair, fair-skin standard of beauty revered in Western culture. To aid in this transformation, she drinks white milk from a Shirley Temple cup and delights in eating Mary Jane candies. Pecola's quest for beauty and acceptance bizarrely escalate after her father drunkenly rapes her. After visiting Soaphead Church, "a self-styled conjure man," Pecola loses final touch with reality.¹ Believing that he has granted her wish for blue eyes, she spends the remainder of her childhood locked in a pitiful insanity, "walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear" (BLU 158).

Altogether, the rape, the ensuing pregnancy, and the quest for blue eyes fuel Pecola's descent into madness and chilling isolation. To a great extent, these things represent a complex, volatile mixing of cultural dynamics and family dysfunction. The conflicting societal values

that Pecola internalizes are rooted in her parents' lives and experiences as well. Although their actions as parents are reprehensible, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove have been unwittingly manipulated and warped by white culture. In depicting their experiences, Morrison demonstrates the destructive impact of white culture on African American identity. Pauline, who feels "uncomfortable" with other black women, prefers the perfect beauty and perfect lives depicted in the false realm of Hollywood movies (BLU 94). She admires how white men in the movies take "such good care of their women" (BLU 97). She emulates Jean Harlow by styling her hair in a similar fashion. However, while watching a Harlow film and enjoying her identification with the white starlet, the five-months-pregnant Pauline breaks a tooth eating candy. The broken tooth and the pregnancy destroy the effect of the movie and serve as a reminder of her imperfect beauty and her violent, unhappy life with Cholly.

Pauline later finds beauty, perfection, and power in the kitchen of her white employer. Here, she is "queen of canned vegetables." Pauline reigns over creditors and service people imperiously and ingratiates herself with the Fishers, who lavish her with praise and the nickname "Polly." Regarding her as an ideal servant and valuable possession, they declare, "We'll never let her go." The more entrenched Pauline becomes in the white household, the more neglectful she becomes of her own. Her dingy house stands in humiliating contrast with the perfect beauty of the Fishers' home, while her husband and children become mere "afterthoughts . . . dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely" (BLU 101).

Cholly's sense of self, particularly his manhood, has been similarly warped through white influence. He endures excruciating humiliation during his first sexual encounter as an adolescent when two white men find him having sex in a vineyard with friend Darlene. The men goad Cholly into completing the act: "[G]et on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good" (BLU 117). Terrified, Cholly is unable to finish. He directs his hatred and anger not at the white men whose standards he fails to meet, but at his female partner, "the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure" (BLU 119). The impotence he experiences with Darlene fuels the sexual confusion and self-loathing that drunkenly coalesce in his daughter's rape years later.

The first pages of *The Bluest Eye* belie the horror that unfolds in Pecola's life. The novel opens innocently enough with the idealized world of the Dick and Jane schoolbook primers, replete with happy children and smiling parents. The familiar, wooden language of the primer appears: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. . . . Who will play with Jane?" (BLU 7). However, the false-myth realm of Dick and Jane cannot mask or alter the realities of poverty, dysfunctional families, or racial difference and prejudice. Like Pecola's world, the world of Dick and Jane soon spins out of control, and becomes a perverse mirror of the Breedlove family. With machine-gun rapidity, the text becomes more and more compressed. Words, sentences, and images run together so that the original innocence and idealized unreality of the primer world are lost forever. Certain words and phrases leap obscenely and ironically off the page: "fatherdick" and "smilefathersmile" grotesquely foreshadow Pecola's rape, while "verynicemother" can be parsed as "ice mother" (BLU 8).

Using images of infertility, loss of innocence, grief, and despair, Morrison establishes a sense of maternal failure early in the novel and makes it clear that children will not thrive in this inverted world. The novel's primary narrator, Claudia MacTeer, looking back on her childhood, tells us that "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" because the seeds had "shriveled and died." Despite the best efforts of Claudia and her sister to nurture the marigolds and despite their deep concern for Pecola's baby, in their youth and innocence they fail at ensuring the survival of either. Like the marigolds planted in the "unyielding" earth, Pecola's baby fails to thrive (BLU 9). Its death represents the death of innocence, which Pecola has already endured; however, for Claudia and her sister, Frieda, the baby's death diminishes the sense of hopeful possibility that childhood should engender. Bearing guilt over the failed marigolds and, by symbolic extension, the dead baby, Claudia assumes responsibility for narrating Pecola's tragic story.

The failure of maternity finds further expression in the disruptions of the natural world in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison structures the novel around the four seasons. The seasons correspond to the changing, cyclical rhythms of the maternal body. Thus, inversions in the natural world find representation in Pecola's maternal experience. In keeping

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*Sula*FINDING THE PEACE
OF THE MOTHER'S BODY

In *Sula* (1973), Toni Morrison subjects maternal experience and the body of the mother to further inversions. Depicted as a negative, destructive force, the maternal functions more as the antimaternal. As in *The Bluest Eye*, maternal experience is associated with silence and psychological disconnection that affects not only individuals but family and community as well. For the most part, the novel focuses on the female friendship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright as they move from adolescence to adulthood in the small, fictional town of Medallion, Ohio. The two characters seem markedly different. Sula grows up willful and rebellious, while Nel remains the quieter and more cautious of the two. However, despite their disparate natures, they find an intimacy together, as both are the "[d]aughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't)" (SUL 52). They form what Barbara Christian terms the "ultimate bond, the responsibility for unintentionally causing the death of another."¹ When the two girls, both twelve years old, play by the river one spring afternoon, they become caught up in the passions and pain of adolescence. An emotionally wounded Sula, who has just overheard her mother's declaration that she does not like her, connects with Nel more intensely than before. Playing together in the grass, both are vaguely aware of sensual stirrings within their bodies. Shortly thereafter, the two girls begin to tease Chicken Little, a small boy who has wandered up from the riverbank. Sula playfully swings him over the river's edge and lets him fall from her grasp into the water. As Sula and Nel watch the child drown,

Bobbie Ann Mason

An Overview

For the most part, maternal experience in Bobbie Ann Mason's fiction assumes less mythic proportions than in Toni Morrison's work. While Morrison's treatment of motherhood has deep Africanist roots that transcend space and time and while she unites myth and reality into a powerful substructure within her fiction, Mason gives maternity a quieter, minimalist role in keeping with the blue-collar, everyday lives she depicts. The contemporary lives of many of her characters seem worlds apart from Morrison's, who suffer the devastating impact of history and white patriarchal culture. In much of Mason's fiction, her characters are ostensibly ordinary, their lives unassuming. They eke out difficult, gritty existences on farms and in small towns in western Kentucky without any real connection to the past or sense of the future.

Immersed in the chaos of modern life where Kmart, fast-food restaurants, television, and pop music define and shape their lives, Mason's characters cope with pernicious and unrelenting change. They are caught in the turmoil of a traditional rural society giving way to mass culture, and their lives are plagued by unhappy marriages, divorce, difficult children, unemployment, illness, and aging. Their family and community relationships are often fragile and do not provide an enduring sense of continuity and stability. Television sitcoms, soap operas, and rock lyrics provide substitute connections and further homogenize their existence. According to Edwin Arnold, Mason's characters are "beset by a change that is too rapid and all-encompassing." Caught between the past and present, they find that their cultural heritage "no longer holds except in memory and guilt." In Mason's works, the culture of the present has "effectively displaced, transformed, and cheapened the traditional."¹

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Spence + Lila

MEMORY, LANDSCAPE, AND THE MOTHER'S BODY

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Conclusion

“LISTENING TO THE STORIES THAT
MOTHERS HAVE TO TELL”

Unless feminism can begin to demystify and politicize motherhood, and by extension female power more generally, fears and projections will continue. Feminism might begin by listening to the stories that mothers have to tell, and by creating the space in which mothers might articulate those stories.

—Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot:
Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*

I opened this book with a discussion of my personal and professional experiences, my mother’s childbearing experiences, and my grandmothers’ voices as a way to lead into my discussion of maternal experience in the novels of Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith. As I bring my book to its conclusion, I find that I am once again immersed in issues of maternity, but in quite new ways. For one, I am awaiting the birth of my granddaughter, my first grandchild and a happy addition to two families containing many men. I have three sons; my daughter-in-law has four brothers. Thus, we are both jubilant about balancing the gender scales a bit more (though we would welcome any new baby with unmitigated joy). My sons are remarkable human beings, and I am convinced that they are my best and most important lifework. However, while they were growing up, I found it

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