

Eleni Ioannou

M.A. Thesis, Charles University: "Great Mothers: Female Empowerment in Selected Novels by Toni Morrison"

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Eleni Ioannou's M.A. thesis on Toni Morrison is a very well-conceived, substantial, and inventive consideration of maternity in three of her major novels. Although the centrality of motherhood in Morrison's fiction is manifest, and its significance has been the subject of much of the extensive criticism about her writing that deals with the conditions of domestic life under slavery and their long-lasting consequences for sexuality, marriage, family, and parenting for blacks in the US, Eleni's approach uncovers many new aspects of the topic. In large part, the originality of her thesis derives from its approach through the history of plantation society that joins Morrison's depiction of Southern US slavery to wider experiences of African enslavement within circum-Caribbean plantation colonialism. Drawing on the path-breaking research about hemispheric plantation culture by Antonio Benitez-Rojo, Edouard Glissant, Valérie Loichot, and others, Eleni suggests with great perceptiveness how the forms of mother-child relations in Morrison reflect non-European, African-derived traditions of maternity, nurture, cultural identity, and ancestral mindfulness. In addition to deploying cultural history adroitly, Eleni's thesis also draws on theoretical work concerning the representation of the female body. Eleni's thesis grew out of a major paper she wrote for a seminar in fiction of the plantation South that I taught at Charles University during my Fulbright lectureship there (2010-11). What first impressed me about Eleni's writing for this course was the determination with which she explored very new historical and theoretical vistas opened to her by the seminar, and then how she was able to develop a single preliminary essay into a very ambitious thesis.

"Great Mothers" is very soundly organized. The introduction succinctly identifies the foundational problematic for black women in the New World: subjected as slaves under plantation slavery and as females under patriarchal society. That black slave women thus suffered doubly—a point Hurston was to make so vividly when she likened black women to the mules of the world—Eleni shows to be the justification for how an understanding of motherhood in Morrison demands both post-colonial and feminist methods of analysis. The precise instruments Eleni will use she describes in the brief methodological overture in chapter 2. Here the thesis locates itself in the growing scholarship on pan-Southern slave societies, the forms of cultural and specifically literary representations and resistances such experiences generated. Eleni's discussion of general feminist theory on maternity, especially Grosz's emphasis on the materiality of female bodies to signify what language cannot denote about kinds of degradation, identifies one key tool—attention to the way bodies figure so prominently in Morrison; the last part crucially pursues the idea into versions of black maternity, suggesting how Morrison's vision is black-feminist without being exactly 'universally' so.

Eleni's readings of *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy* not only succeed as freestanding accounts of varieties of motherhood in Morrison, they also add up to an argument about the author's methodical (if not systematic) consideration of the problem in different contexts, with different individual responses to the obstacles confronting mothers. In her interpretation of *Solomon*, Eleni demonstrates elegantly how maternal relations like those between Pilate and Milkman may derive from the accident of literal blood relations, but must be forged willfully and creatively in order to satisfy imaginative needs and construct social barriers to the divisions enforced by slave mastery. This allows Eleni to apply the very powerful concept of "other-mothering" to describe such socially constructed forms of maternity. One very subtle observation of this chapter involves the appreciation for wandering, for the fluidity and evanescence of relations, that paradoxically calls forth

stronger means of identification and solidarity. Forms of response that repudiate property and violence indicate the creative force of slave counter-relations, and Eleni's discussion of the co-opted Ruth helps measure the sacrifice required of those who refuse to comply with their own subjugation. I want to single out as well the superb connection made in this chapter between the female body's association with food and nurturing, and the production of oral stories. Oral imagery anticipates the production of speech in the oral tradition, the female body becoming the very instrument of memory.

In her discussion of *Beloved* Eleni shows that Morrison's interest has moved to the conditions of embodied maternity under slavery. I'd say the main original thrust of this chapter is its demonstration that the dominant ideals associated with motherhood—intimacy of mother-child bodies, protection of life, determination to keep families together—gets inverted under the perversity of slavery. The consequence is a form of motherhood under slavery that must act to sunder, slay, and scatter in order to accomplish its contrary ends. Here the highlight for me is the brilliant adduction of an African concept (and figure) of maternal justice, as transcending western rationalized versions.

In turning to Morrison's late novel *A Mercy*, Eleni beautifully suggests how Morrison's career-spanning mindfulness of a slavery as a transatlantic phenomenon would predict her trajectory into this fiction that imagines seventeenth century creole plantation colonialism in the New World. Here Eleni concentrates on the way the novel brings forward a community of women, across racial and class divides, that affiliate against the harsh powers of patriarchy in establishing the commercial and social patterns that developed into full-fledged Southern plantation societies. Eleni's reading ranges subtly across numerous instances of the fragile relations fashioned under the circumstances of masters' absence.

In the course of our exchanges about her thesis, I raised two questions with Eleni that I felt she might consider once her thesis was completed. One is what it means for Morrison to give such value to motherhood during the time she's writing; James Rubin has argued that *Beloved* reflects white liberal ideologies about the continued "damage" of black culture: in this interpretation, slavery was responsible for destroying the "ideal" of the nuclear family for blacks, and this damage continues into the 20th C welfare state, with single mother households that are seen as pathological in some sense, in need of cure. (Rubin discusses *Beloved* in connection with the so-called Moynihan Report, a Congressional Committee report in 1980 or so that, however sympathetically, pictured black underclasses as damaged and wanting.) Morrison's view coincides with Moynihan's, it might be argued, and the figure of the strong black mother might actually be reinforcing some of the conceptual vestiges of racism, patronizing attitudes toward black inadequacies, etc. The model of powerful individual effort and the will to overcome circumstances also conforms to ideologies of liberal individualism--picking yourself up by your own bootstraps, not relying on the state for help.

Second, the idea of a black maternal line of cultural preservation--handing stories down and remembering the cultural past as a particular obligation and opportunity of women--could also be questioned as reflecting the determination of a cohort of black feminist critics in the 1980s to construct a transhistorical tradition of strong black creative expression. Some have argued that this attitude toward a kind of timeless imaginative tradition blocks out the particulars of historical context (particularly economic or political) that different writers from different locations and times might have been engaged with.

I recommend the highest grade for this thesis.