

Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart

Andrea O'Reilly

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Reviewed by Dolana Mogadime

Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart begins with Andrea O'Reilly's description of her quest to understand the meaning of the ancient properties of black women and motherhood as a site of empowerment. As a white woman, academic, and mother, O'Reilly navigates the worlds of white feminists and black feminists in relation to motherhood and mothering. For the author, the Anglo-American feminist view of motherhood as a site of patriarchal oppression is problematic, and she goes to great lengths to chart the limitations embedded in western notions of motherhood. In fact, O'Reilly's book is built on counter narrative, and her critical position opens onto alternative and empowering African American conceptualizations of mothering.

O'Reilly's intent "is to read Morrison as a maternal theorist" (xi) and she provides refreshing insight into the maternal theme as a central aspect of Morrison's fiction. Throughout her book, O'Reilly muses over Morrison's many interviews and articles in which she publicly articulates the views of black womanhood and motherhood that she embeds in her fiction. She engages Morrison's own voice and surmises: "In her reflections on motherhood, both inside and outside her fiction, Morrison articulates a fully developed theory of African American mothering that is central to her larger political and philosophical stance on black womanhood. Building upon black women's experiences of, and perspectives on, motherhood, Morrison develops a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and role, radically different than the motherhood practiced and prescribed in the dominant culture" (1).

In her navigation between two worlds, O'Reilly offers a creative understanding of the work of mothering theorists and the notion of maternal practice and explores connections between Anglo-American and black feminism. She analyzes intersections between Sara Ruddick's model of maternal practice and Patricia Hill Collins's standpoint theory of black mothering to consider ways in which Toni Morrison "defines motherwork as a political enterprise that assumes as its central aim the empowerment of children" (1).

O'Reilly artfully extends Ruddick's notion of maternal practice. While she foregrounds Ruddick's model of motherwork as characterized by three demands – preservation, growth, and social acceptance – she reformulates and extends this model by suggesting that Morrison's desire to train children to become socially acceptable includes the African American custom of cultural bearing, "raising children in accordance with the values, beliefs, and customs of traditional African American culture and in particular the values of the funk and ancient proprieties. In each of these [maternal] tasks – preservation, nurturance, cultural bearing – Morrison is concerned with protecting children from the hurts of a racist and, for daughters, sexist culture, and with teaching children how to protect themselves so they may be empowered to survive and resist the racist and patriarchal culture in which they live and develop a strong and authentic identity as a black person" (29).

Black feminists like myself, who study racial differences between black and white communities and who argue for the political importance of mothering in teaching, are drawn to O'Reilly's thesis that mothering is a potential site of empowerment. O'Reilly boldly reconfigures hegemonic western notions of motherhood while maintaining dialogues across cultural differences. She disrupts the dominant view of motherhood and

values the ancient properties of black womanhood and mothering as a site for social and political emancipation. The urgency and relevance of this maternal theoretical approach is articulated best by O'Reilly: "Morrison in her rendition of mothering as a political and public enterprise, emerges as a social commentator and political theorist who radically, through her maternal philosophy, reworks, rethinks and reconfigures the concerns and strategies of African American, and in particular black women's emancipation in America" (xi).