

# Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart

Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart. Andrea O'Reilly. Albany: State U of New York P, 2004. xiv + 229 pages. \$84.50 cloth; \$23.95 paper.

While sorting through mountains of articles and books about the works of Toni Morrison, I realized there existed a glaring omission in the literature: there was yet to be published a single volume that solely addressed the characterization of mothers in Morrison's narrative. Given that I compare portraits of maternity in novels by women authors of the Americas in my doctoral work, I was overcome with visions of grandeur, and at the very least, instant tenure. Alas, Andrea O'Reilly got there first. An associate professor at York University, and the president of the Association for Research on Mothering, she has written what, to my knowledge, is the first book that focuses exclusively on how Toni Morrison employs the theme of motherhood throughout her fiction. O'Reilly examines all of Morrison's novels, including a brief commentary on her latest publication, *Love*. Reading Morrison as a "maternal theorist" (xi), the author persuasively demonstrates that Morrison's beliefs about motherwork and motherlove are fundamental in understanding her perspective about black womanhood.

In her first chapter, O'Reilly carefully lays out her argument using the theories of Patricia Hill Collins, Sara Ruddick, and Adrienne Rich among others. She reveals how for black women in North America, mothering is an empowering experience that is fundamental to the survival of the black, and more specifically, African American community. This is contrary to a dominant culture that insists that mothering is a politically neutral endeavor taken up by women whose identities should be subsumed beneath the title of "mother." She cites numerous interviews in which Morrison states that motherhood, in her experience, was a source of liberation, a means by which she became her best self. Central to O'Reilly's argument is how, for Morrison, the prosperity of the black community depends on the existence of the "motherline," a term borrowed from Naomi Lowinsky that refers to a knowledge of an ancestral heritage. At the same time, there needs to be the continual passage of traditional black values from one generation to the next. The successful transfer of these principles falls squarely on the shoulders of mothers. O'Reilly then makes the point that Morrison illustrates the critical importance of these women by writing novels in which we see the results of disastrous mothering and the impact of this failure on the larger populace.

O'Reilly begins her examination of the literary works by detailing the problems of the black community as described in the novels. The author argues that, for Morrison, there exists a detachment from the positive attributes of black culture. In her second chapter, O'Reilly looks at how the assumption of "normative gender ideologies" (47) dooms Pauline in *The Bluest Eye*, Sula in the novel of that name, and Jadine in *Tar Baby*. All of these women identify with values of the dominant culture, thereby separating them from the motherline that carries the affirming ideals that Morrison believes would enrich their lives. In rejecting their own culture, they therefore compromise whatever chance exists for their own empowerment.

O'Reilly addresses the ruptures in the motherline caused by historical ordeals in her third chapter. More specifically, she examines how Morrison addresses the themes of assimilation, migration, and slavery in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. The first poses a threat to the vitality of the black community because in accepting patriarchal values of the prevailing culture, the community moves away from one that validates the work of women. Mothers who conform to dominant culture therefore cannot adequately inform their children of the teachings of the black community. Migration to the urban north in the US took black Americans away from the rural south, the region in which many of the time-honored standards of the community continue to be sustained. Finally, slavery, more than any historical event, fractured the motherline by denying blacks their humanity and causing the permanent fragmentations of families. In these novels, O'Reilly believes Morrison's goal to be to "render explicit the historical causes of motherline rupture and disruption and to portray the devastating consequence of such for African American people."

While in the first few chapters, O'Reilly looks at disconnections from the motherline, in the subsequent sections she considers the means by which the traditional values are re-established. She takes up the theme of repairing the motherline in her fourth chapter, considering the triumphant journey of Milkman in *Song of Solomon* and the failure of Jadine in *Tar Baby*. She maintains that the achievement of successful re-attachment depends on the person who guides the quest. O'Reilly then examines the ways in which the mothers in all of the novels, with the exception of *Jazz*, attempt to carry on the principles of the community. Among the examples that demonstrate success in this venture are Mrs. MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye*, Eva in *Sula*, and Sethe in *Beloved*. She then contrasts these portraits with those of mothers who do not display adequate nurturance of their children, namely, Ruth in *Song of Solomon*, Margaret in *Tar Baby*, and the women in *Paradise*. In her final chapter, O'Reilly reveals how these convent women of *Paradise*, as well as the protagonists of *Jazz*, go on to heal the wounds suffered as a result of maternal neglect.

This volume is an invaluable contribution both to literary criticism about the works of Toni Morrison and to motherhood studies. The comments O'Reilly makes in her notes serve not only as a complement to the rest of the volume but also provide insight that hopefully will serve as inspiration for other scholars who work in these fields. She ably and thoroughly considers all of Morrison's novels, revealing how, for Morrison, the crux of the African American community lies in its ability to value and appreciate its mothers.

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