

**Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *A Mercy*:
rethinking (m)othering**

**Maternidade nas obras *Sula* e *A Mercy* de Toni Morrison:
repensando concepções**

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Abstract: Motherhood tends to elicit strong feelings in women as well as a passionate rhetoric in our cultural discourse. Daughters have extensively been the focus of studies about mother-daughter bonds. Surprisingly, much less attention has been given to mother figures. By tracing the theme of motherhood in *Sula* (1973) and *A Mercy* (2009), I investigate how Toni Morrison rewrites the experiences of black mothers during slavery and its aftermath in the United States. Drawing mainly on feminist and black feminist theories, I explore, through literary analysis, how motherhood assumes various forms in both novels. The comparative analysis of *Sula* and *A Mercy* challenges distorted views commonly associated with the black mother and extends notions of mothering beyond biological determinants.

Keywords: Motherhood; black mothers; *Sula*; *A Mercy*; Toni Morrison.

Resumo: A maternidade tende a provocar sentimentos fortes em mulheres, bem como uma retórica passional em nosso discurso cultural. Filhas tem sido extensivamente o foco de estudos sobre laços materno-filiais, mas, surpreendentemente, menos atenção tem sido dada às figuras maternas. Ao traçar o tema da maternidade em *Sula* (1973) e *A Mercy* (2009), investigo como Toni Morrison reescreve as experiências de mães

negras durante e após a escravidão nos Estados Unidos. Baseando-se em teorias feministas e em crítica literária feminista afro-americana, exploro por meio da análise literária, as diferentes formas de maternidade nas obras. A análise comparativa das obras *Sula* e *A Mercy* desafia visões distorcidas comumente associadas à mulher negra e amplia noções de maternidade para além de determinantes biológicos.

Palavras-chave: maternidade; mães negras; *Sula*; *A Mercy*; Toni Morrison.

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Motherhood in Slavery and its Aftermath

The theme of motherhood permeates U.S. contemporary literature. Nevertheless, many narratives tend to ignore mothers and focus on the daughters' experiences. Marianne Hirsch argues that narratives which "focus only on the daughter's perspective and puts the mother in the object position may be colluding with patriarchy".¹ Under patriarchy, women are often defined simply as mothers, and as such, they are not viewed as individuals. With the sole role of caring, mothers' experiences, personalities, and desires are often ignored. Rebecca Ferguson remarks that in Toni Morrison's fictions "the connections between mothers and children assumes central importance... partly because this subject (and the experience of black women generally) had been long neglected by many black male authors, and partly because legacy and responsibility became especially urgent in the context of motherhood".² In her novels, Morrison shows the complexity of black women's experiences as mothers. Linda Wagner-Martin has analyzed several of Morrison's fictions and she argues that: "the author's variations in drawing the roles of mothers, as well as the outcomes of that mothering in the equally varied characters of children, provide necessary critical information".³ Morrison goes beyond

¹ HIRSCH. *Maternal narratives: cruel enough to stop the blood*, p. 415.

² FERGUSON. *Rewriting black identities*, p. 16.

³ WAGNER-MARTIN. *Toni Morrison and the maternal*, p.3.

the stereotypical image of African-American women as impeccable mothers, while at the same time challenging the notion that motherhood deteriorates women.

Although the portrayal of black mothers as mighty can be empowering for women, there is a tendency to romanticize black women's maternal experiences, which confines women to be exemplary mothers. Carole Boyce Davies argues that, in the past, there has been "a need in black cultures to affirm black motherhood and/or to construct an essentialized mother as a strategic response to racist constructs... this affirmation becomes too defining and limiting for women".⁴ Historically, the figure of the black woman has been associated with the black matriarch. As such, she is defined as a mother who "regards mothering as one of the most important things in her life... [and] attempts to shield her children from and to prepare them to accept the prejudices of the white world".⁵ This stereotype reinforces the notion of a selfless, dominant, and biologically-determined mother. Morrison's novels break away from labels that essentialize women's experiences as mothers to depict the different experiences of the characters. In fact, black mothers are often depicted as having an "ambivalent nature".⁶ In discussing the complexity of mother figures, Mae Henderson explains how the view of biological determination considers "women's feelings about pregnancy and motherhood as a manifestation of an instinctive (innate) desire to mother above all else".⁷ This idea dangerously equates motherhood with womanhood, because it implies that women are only complete as mothers. Thus, motherhood is often seen through the lens of a biological imperative that considers women to have a maternal instinct and desire to be mothers. This perspective tends to idealize motherhood, and when applied to the experiences of black women in the context of slavery and its aftermath, leads to the erroneous picture of the black mother as completely selfless, or as astoundingly cruel or dominant.

⁴ DAVIES. *Black women, writing and identity: migrations of the subject*, p. 145.

⁵ ANDERSON. *Black matriarch: portrayals of women in three plays*, p. 93.

⁶ GOGOI. *Negotiating black motherhood in Toni Morrison's Beloved and A Mercy: reading the slave/neo-slave narratives*, p. 1.

⁷ HENDERSON. *Pathways to fracture: African American mothers and the complexity of maternal absences*, p. 30.

This article focuses on motherhood as a type of bond among characters, which is often subject to change according to historical and social circumstances, rather than being inscribed as a biological determinant for women characters. In such a context, different characters can perform roles of mothers or surrogate mothers, as motherhood is not confined to biological determinants. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich shows how inadequate and harmful labels of mothering and mothers can be: “the dominant male culture in separating man as knower from both woman and from nature as the objects of knowledge evolved certain intellectual polarities which still have the power to blind our imaginations”.⁸ By conditioning motherhood to biological determinants, patriarchy reinforces the idea that women are naturally caregivers. However, motherhood can be seen as an acquired social practice, an experience not strictly determined biologically, but a *knowing* that women acquire, which they may learn with and through their bodies. The binary opposition that distinguishes men as knowers and women as intuitive should be problematized, to deconstruct paradigms that limit the experiences of motherhood. It is argued that motherhood can be seen as a site of resistance, where mothers of color choose to defy white slave owners’ authority. Mothers of color take an active stance, choosing between whatever little choice they have, to become mothers, surrogate mothers, or othermothers.

In the context of *Sula* (1973) and *A Mercy* (2009), during and after slavery, the notion of motherhood differs from the conventional characteristics of mothering, as it is neither marginalized nor romanticized. The comparative analysis of Morrison’s *Sula* and *A Mercy* illustrates the complexity of motherhood, challenging stereotypes commonly associated with black mothers and extending notions of mothering beyond biological determinants. *A Mercy* illustrates that during slavery, black women did not have any guarantee that they would keep their own children and, consequently, traditional forms of attachment and parenting were not possible. I focus on the mother-daughter bond between Florens and her mother, both slaves in D’Ortega’s plantation, to depict the harsh reality of mothers during slavery. The novel *Sula* shows that even decades after the abolition of slavery, black mothers still face several hardships in a sexist and racist society. The different kinds of motherhood are analyzed

⁸ RICH. *Of women born: motherhood as experience and institution*, p. 62.

through the figures of Eva and her daughter, Hannah, to illustrate that both characters defy essentialist views that confine black mothers. In both novels, it is shown that motherhood exists beyond biological determinants, as many characters come to perform the roles of mothers, surrogate mothers, and othermothers. In *Sula*, Eva becomes the mother to many characters she welcomes into her pension and in *A Mercy*, Lina becomes Florens's othermother.

In *A Mercy*, the chapters alternate mainly between Florens's narration and a third-person omniscient narrator.⁹ The narrative opens with Florens writing her story, an act that is already unconventional, because she, a young slave girl, is able to read and write. The story takes place at the beginning of the seventeenth century, in the early colonial period of the United States of America. Slavery was then becoming a recurrent business enterprise and, for that reason, any bond among slaves was banished in order to increase economic profit and establish a consolidated market of flesh. Slave mothers did not have any right over themselves or their children because they were considered mere merchandise. As maternal bonds were constantly repressed and forbidden, motherhood became a site of empowerment for black women. As Foucault states: "there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised".¹⁰ In this sense, power brings within itself the possibility of subversion, and as oppression intensifies, it generates a scenario that can instigate transgression, as seen with many black mothers in slavery. Similarly, bell hooks states that "marginality [can be seen] as much more than a site of deprivation... it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance... a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist".¹¹ Through motherhood, black women often find the possibility of resisting oppression by loving their children and being loved while trying to ensure their survival at the margins of society. The women characters claim motherhood and thus refuse roles of powerless victims.

⁹ There are a few chapters narrated by the other women characters, Lina, Rebekka, and Sorrow, who have the opportunity to tell their own stories.

¹⁰ FOUCAULT. Truth and power, p. 142.

¹¹ HOOKS. *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, p. 150.

Comparing motherhood in Southern fiction, Paula Eckard argues that: “slave mothers’ experience of maternity proved to be more wrenching. Their sexuality and their ability to bear children rendered them particularly vulnerable within the system of slavery”.¹² In Morrison’s *A Mercy*, Florens’s mother¹³ experiences the confining contradictions imposed on black mothers during slavery and the lack of opportunity to explain her actions. Florens and her mother initially belong to D’Ortega, a Portuguese slave owner, who owes money to Jacob, a tradesman. Jacob goes to D’Ortega’s plantation to receive his payment, but “it became clear what D’Ortega had left to offer. Slaves”.¹⁴ D’Ortega insists that Jacob should take a slave as payment, but Jacob is hesitant because slaves are not goods he trades in. But near the house, Florens’s mother catches Jacob’s attention: “He saw a woman standing in the doorway with two children. One on her hip; one hiding behind her skirts. She looked healthy enough, better fed than the others. On a whim, mostly to silence him and fairly sure D’Ortega would refuse, he said, ‘Her. That one. I’ll take her’”.¹⁵ Jacob describes Florens’s mother, who is a house slave quite valuable to D’Ortega. He answers: “Ah, no. Impossible. My wife won’t allow. She can’t live without her”.¹⁶ Jacob perceives from his reaction that “there was more than cooking D’Ortega stood to lose”.¹⁷ It is implied that Florens’s mother is abused by D’Ortega and, for that reason, she is kept around the house. Although D’Ortega says his wife cannot live without her, it is he that wants her close. Interrupting the conversation between both male characters, the narrator describes the scene of Florens and her mother:

¹² ECKARD. *Maternal body and voice in Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith*, p. 18.

¹³ In the narrative, the name of Florens’s mother is not revealed. She is referred to as Florens’s mother by the narrator and as *mãe* or *minha mãe*, by Florens. The influence of the Portuguese language is present because D’Ortega, the owner of the plantation, is Portuguese. The author’s choice of not giving a name to Florens’s mother highlights the agony of obscurity black mothers faced and resonates her experience with that of many mothers in slavery.

¹⁴ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 21.

¹⁵ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 23-24.

¹⁶ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 24.

¹⁷ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 24.

The little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes... The woman cradling the small boy on her hip came forward. Her voice is barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency. "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter."¹⁸

In an act that surprises Jacob, the woman offers her own daughter to be taken away. Because of this event, Jacob misinterprets Florens's mother's actions, describing Florens as the: "ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away"¹⁹ Like his peers, he has a distorted view of motherhood that sees black mothers as cruel and detached. This assumption benefits Jacob, because it releases him of any guilt for his action of buying a young girl and, thus, depriving the little girl of her mother's company. Florens's mother is judged through the lenses of a white male who fails to understand the reality of black women during slavery. He conveniently portrays Florens's mother as monstrous and convinces himself that he is doing Florens a favor by taking her away from this unnatural mother. Jacob thinks to himself that the "acquisition [of Florens]... could be seen as a rescue"²⁰ insisting on the fact that he saved Florens from a mother who rejected her.

However, later in the novel, Florens's mother has the chance to tell her story and shed light on her actions. This is possible because she narrates the last chapter herself. She tells the story from her viewpoint as if speaking directly to her daughter: "you [Florens] wanted the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senhor's eye"²¹ Despite Florens's mother's attempts to keep her as a child as long as possible, she is worried because D'Ortega started to notice her daughter. She knows that if Florens stays, she is doomed to have the same fate as herself: to be abused and to serve the sexual needs of her white master. She continues to explain her actions: "One chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference"²² Florens's mother is aware that there are no guarantees for slaves, but she knows

¹⁸ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p 26.

¹⁹ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 34.

²⁰ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 34.

²¹ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 166.

²² MORISSON. *A Mercy*, p. 166.

that there are different kinds of oppression and abuse. She takes whatever action available to prevent her daughter's rape by D'Ortega. As Amanda Putnam suggests, Florens's mother was "begging to save her infant son (who will likely die without her care) as well as providing a life-altering opportunity for her daughter, this mother gives away her own chance of living a better life so that both her children will survive".²³ Florens's mother has very limited choices, but she fights to save her children. She describes the same scene of the encounter with Jacob, but from her own point of view:

You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes.

It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees.²⁴

Florens's mother sees in Jacob the only chance for Florens to escape from D'Ortega. As a mother, she tries to secure a better future for her daughter—a future with hopes that Florens will escape at least the cruelty of sexual abuse. She experiences the dilemma many mothers faced in slavery. Hooks explains that: "In the midst of a brutal racist system, which did not value black life, [the slave mother] valued the life of her child enough to resist the system".²⁵ Florens's mother refuses the role of helpless victim and takes whatever action available to help her children live. Florens's mother is given a voice, and her cry resonates with those cries of many black mothers who face the contradictions of mothering under slavery and are often cruelly misjudged.

In Morrison's fictions, motherhood becomes a fluid and complexly-developed experience. Similar to *A Mercy*, the novel *Sula* can be said to: "problematize the mother rather than romanticize her".²⁶ The novel challenges the notion that all black women are inherently good

²³ PUTNAM, Mothering violence: ferocious female resistance in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, p. 8.

²⁴ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 166-167.

²⁵ HOOKS. *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, p. 44.

²⁶ DAVIES. *Black women, writing and identity: migrations of the subject*, p. 146.

and nurturing mothers, or even if such a concept is possible. In *Sula*, different forms of motherhood illustrate the complexity of the experience of black mothers in a post-slavery society. I analyze the Peace family, more specifically the characters Eva and her daughter Hannah, to show the importance of alternative perspectives to depict black mothers' experiences.²⁷ Eva is abandoned by her husband, BoyBoy, when her children, Hannah and Plum, are still young. She is left with "\$1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel. The children needed her, and she needed money and to get on with her life".²⁸ She is overwhelmed with emotions but she manages to "postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it".²⁹ Although Eva is helped by her neighbors, she does not have a proper way to make ends meet. After surviving the winter, she leaves her children with Mr. Suggs for eighteen months to find a job and earn money to support herself and her children.

During this harsh winter, when Eva is still without a place to live and out of money, Plum, her youngest child, stops having bowel movements. She tries to massage his stomach with castor oil, but nothing works. He "cried and fought so they couldn't get much down his throat anyway. He seemed in great pain and his shrieks were pitched high outrage and suffering... he gagged, choked and looked as though he was strangling to death".³⁰ Plum is desperately in pain, and being a baby, his only resort is to cry out for help. Eva cannot stand to see him hurting but she lacks the money to take him to a doctor. She then decides to end his misery with her own hands:

²⁷ Although Eva's granddaughter, Sula is one of the main characters, together with her best friend Nel, their sisterhood and experience as girls in the Bottom Community is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on aspects of motherhood. For scholarly works about sisterhood in *Sula* see Quashie, Kevin Quashie's *The Other Dancer as Self: Girlfriend Selfhood in Toni Morrison's Sula and Alice Walker's The Color Purple* (2001) and Deborah E. MacDowell's 'The Self and the Other': Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female Text (1988).

²⁸ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 32.

²⁹ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 32.

³⁰ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 33-34.

Deep in its darkness and freezing stench she squatted down, turned the baby over on her knees, exposed his buttocks and had shoved the last bit of food she had in the world... up his ass. Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels. Her fingernail snagged what felt like a pebble; she pulled it out and others followed.³¹

Eva acts out of the necessity to free Plum from his misery and does anything in her power to help him. She is successful and he “stopped crying as the black hard stools ricocheted onto the frozen ground”.³² Eva is ready to take whatever action is needed to help her children.³³

Eva is represented as a strong mother who will do anything to ensure her children’s survival. Nevertheless, she is not reduced to or confined by her role as mother; she is represented as a woman. Mae Henderson mentions that: “African American women are many times confined to the dominant discourse’s stereotypes as sexually promiscuous, matriarchs and lazy welfare mothers”.³⁴ Morrison challenges this view that classifies black women under binary distinctions by portraying black mothers as fluid characters, complexly developed, and therefore distant from preordained stereotypes. This is the case of Eva. Although she is a mother and the provider for the household, she is not reduced to the figure of a traditional matriarch. She challenges boundaries of social roles attributed to mothers by accepting her sexuality. She is not portrayed as a perfect selfless mother, but as a woman with personal aspirations and desires. She “simply loved maleness, for its own sake”.³⁵ This makes her

³¹ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 34.

³² MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 34.

³³ Later in the novel, Plum becomes addicted to drugs. Eva decides to set him free from addiction by killing him. A violent and unorthodox act, even so, she cannot be simply judged as good or bad because of the complexity of her experience as a woman and as a mother. For more detail, please refer to Andrea O’Reilly’s *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (2004), Vinayaka Selvi’s *Mothering at the Margins: The Politics of Mothering in the Novels of Gloria Taylor, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker* (2012), and Amanda Putnam’s *Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni, Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, Sula, Beloved and A Mercy* (2015) listed under “References” at the end of this article.

³⁴ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 32.

³⁵ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 41.

a defiant character because she challenges the stereotype of the matriarch by assuming her sexuality. At the same time, she cannot be labeled as sexually promiscuous, because she is a caring mother. She loves and cares for her children, while at the same time, acknowledging her own desires. The narrative voice portrays Eva as a complex character — an independent woman, a mother who accepts her sexuality.

Hannah, like her mother Eva, is not a conventional selfless mother. She has her own sexual needs, which she usually fulfills, independently of her role as a mother to Sula. Hannah “refused to live without the attentions of a man and after Rekus’ death had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors”.³⁶ She has many lovers after Sula’s father, Rekus, passes away, but she has no desire of having another matrimonial relationship with any of the men she gets involved with. At an early age, Sula sees Hannah, her mother, with different men around the house. One day “Sula came home from school and found her mother in the bed, curled spoon in the arms of a man. Seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable”.³⁷ Hannah does not hide her involvement with men, and she is not embarrassed by her sexual practices. For her, motherhood and sexuality are both part of her womanhood. As mentioned, Henderson discusses that black women are often stereotypically portrayed as “sexually promiscuous”;³⁸ which confines black mothers’ experiences and disseminates stereotypes. Characters such as Eva and Hannah challenge these boundaries by being mothers who care about their children while at the same time expressing their sexuality and consequently their individuality. Neither character fits the conventional stereotype of matriarchs or sexually promiscuous, because although they love their children, they are not selfless and they embrace their sexuality. Before they see themselves as mothers, they see themselves as individuals, as women.

³⁶ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 42.

³⁷ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 44.

³⁸ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 32.

Motherhood beyond Biological Determinants

In *Sula* and *A Mercy*, the concept of motherhood is expanded to include more than the traditional biological bonds between mothers and daughters. As common to African-American literature, mothers can be represented through grandmothers, friends, and even neighbors. Gloria Joseph argues that “black women play integral parts in the family and frequently it is immaterial whether they are biological mothers, sisters, or members of the extended family”.³⁹ In *Sula*, the mother figure is often not determined biologically, as is the case with Eva, who becomes a mother for many characters who live in her pension. Likewise, in *A Mercy*, Lina, a Native American slave, comes to represent a surrogate mother for Florens.

The mother as the main person responsible for the child is actually a notion of modern society, as the nuclear family becomes reduced and the community is separated from the process of mothering. The sense of community for African Americans is important, as some mothers “rely on informal kinship and community networks”⁴⁰ to care for their children temporarily or permanently. For example, Eva leaves her children with Mrs. Suggs for over a year to find a job and make money to support her family. She knows she can count on Mrs. Suggs, her neighbor, to take care of them.⁴¹ Surrogate mothers are common in different communities because many mothers have to endure various hardships and need each other’s support. Solidarity among women of color comes to be one possibility of fighting against victimization in a sexist and racist society.

As Mrs. Suggs, Eva becomes a surrogate mother to many characters who live in her pension. As Patricia Hill Collins mentions “mothering [is] not a privatized nurturing ‘occupation’ reserved for biological mothers, and the economic support of children was not the

³⁹ JOSEPH. Black mothers and daughters: their roles and functions in American society, p. 76.

⁴⁰ HENDERSON. Pathways to fracture: African American mothers and the complexities of maternal absence, p. 33.

⁴¹ The role of Mrs. Suggs as a surrogate mother is not analyzed in this article because in the narrative, this bond is not fully depicted. There are only a few sentences uttered by Eva and the third-person narrator about Mrs. Suggs keeping the children while Eva is away.

exclusive responsibility of men”.⁴² Eva represents this kind of woman, as she embodies the maternal figure for different characters and is the economic provider of her family. Without a husband, she runs the pension on her own terms. The narrator describes her home: “Among the tenants in that big house were the children Eva took in”.⁴³ She brings children from the streets to her pension, takes care of them, incorporates these children in the dynamics of the household, educates them, and expects them to have appropriate behavior.

Sula calls Eva, her grandmother: “Big Mamma”.⁴⁴ Sula’s remark is a reference to Eva’s vast experience as a mother to various characters in the narrative. As an example, Eva adopts three children who “came with woolen caps and names given to them by their mothers, grandmothers, or somebody’s best friend. Eva snatched the caps off their heads and ignored their names”.⁴⁵ Although the boys come from different families, she refuses to see them separately and names each of the three boys *Dewey*. Many characters, such as Hannah, feel unease about this generalization. Hannah asks her mother: “How is anybody going to tell them apart?”⁴⁶ But Eva’s point is that there is no difference among them: “What you need to tell them apart for? They’s all deweys”.⁴⁷ This attitude may seem absurd at first, as each character is significantly different from the other, but they “accepted Eva’s view, becoming in fact as well as in a name a dewey—joining with the other two to become a trinity with a plural name”.⁴⁸ Slowly, each boy becomes more like the other, until no one can tell them apart and they become the Deweys. They respect Eva as their surrogate mother, and they accept the name she gives them. They become a unit, united in everything, and they forget about their separate identities. One might argue that this shows Eva’s disregard for the boys’ individuality; however, her behavior also illustrates Eva’s different way of reasoning things. Her actions reflect her individuality. By making them one, Eva offers them a sense of belonging and they become each other’s family.

⁴² COLLINS. *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, p. 45.

⁴³ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 37.

⁴⁴ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 92.

⁴⁵ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 37.

⁴⁶ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 38.

⁴⁷ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 38.

⁴⁸ MORRISON. *Sula*, p. 38.

In *A Mercy*, Lina becomes a surrogate mother for Florens, as they long to care and be cared for. Both characters are separated from their families at a very early age. As discussed earlier, Florens is sold to Jacob. She is separated from her mother while still a child and longs for a mother figure. Lina, while also a child, is one of the few Native American survivors of a plague in her village. French soldiers find her hiding up a tree and take her to a Presbyterian village nearby. There, she suffers discrimination and abuse because she is Native American. When she refuses to be a victim and reacts, she is marginalized and expelled from every household, being forced to live outside, along with animals. When Jacob visits the town, he takes Lina, who is already older, but still longs to find another family. Although Lina manages to survive by herself, she desires to have family connections as she once had as a child.

Lina is not Florens's biological mother or a relative; yet, she becomes a surrogate mother to Florens. In *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: Politics of the Heart*, Andrea O'Reilly discusses a pattern in Morrison's novels in which "[o]ther women, while not mothers themselves, are ship and safe harbor to children through the practice of othermothering".⁴⁹ O'Reilly defines *othermother* as a close woman friend who "heals the woman by prompting her to take a journey of re-memory and reconnection".⁵⁰ Not limited to relatives, othermothers help women cope with the loss of their biological mothers, which was a common pattern in slavery. Patricia Hill Collins also adopts the term othermothers to widely refer to women bonds among black women that help them survive and shape their subjectivities. The term othermother is adopted in this article, and its meaning is extended beyond that of black women, to include women of color, as is the case with Lina. She can be seen as an othermother to Florens, because despite their differences, a mother-daughter bond marks their relationship and together they resist the paradigms of a slave holding society that ruptures women's bonds.

Lina and Florens meet when Jacob brings Florens to the farm. As soon as she arrives in Jacob's farm, Lina is absorbed with feelings of care, as she: "had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow".⁵¹ Florens mentions with delight, "Lina

⁴⁹ O'REILLY. *Toni Morrison and motherhood: a politics of the heart*, p. 41.

⁵⁰ O'REILLY. *Toni Morrison and motherhood: a politics of the heart*, p. 41.

⁵¹ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 60.

smiles when she looks at me and wraps me for warmth”.⁵² Immediately, both sympathize with each other. They slowly become more involved with one another: “they had memorable nights, lying tighter, when Florens listened in rigid delight to Lina’s stories”⁵³ and their relationship is gradually strengthened. Florens feels safe in her arm and “would sigh then, her head on Lina’s shoulder and when sleep came the little girl’s smile lingered”.⁵⁴ Lina comforts her, and they begin to love and trust each other. Florens likes to hear Lina’s stories, but the ones she loves most are always those about maternal bonds: “especially called for were stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters”.⁵⁵ She admires protective mothers who struggle to ensure the survival of their children by keeping them close. Florens longs for the same kind of bond, because she erroneously believes her mother offered her to Jacob out of lack of love. As an othermother, Lina tries to help Florens through love and care.

When Florens is alone, she constantly misses Lina and needs her. While on an errand to get the blacksmith to save Jacob’s wife from an illness, Florens longs for Lina’s guidance: “I need Lina to say how to shelter in wilderness”.⁵⁶ As her othermother, Lina represents the wisdom and knowledge that Florens needs. While alone, Florens misses “sleeping in the broken sleigh with Lina”.⁵⁷ Like a daughter who carefully listens to her mother’s advice, Florens makes constant reference to Lina’s teachings: “Lina says... not all natives are like her... so watch out”.⁵⁸ She tries to remember things that she learned with Lina so she will be able to survive on her own in the woods.

Florens and Lina are in need of love, as they are trying to survive in a society that has lacerated their family bonds. The narrator states that “the mother hunger—to be one or have one—both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone”.⁵⁹ Both feel the need to have a mother-daughter bond to survive under the

⁵² MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 8.

⁵³ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 61.

⁵⁴ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 63.

⁵⁵ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 61.

⁵⁶ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 42.

⁵⁷ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 6.

⁵⁸ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 5.

⁵⁹ MORRISON. *A Mercy*, p. 63.

cruel realities of slavery. By cultivating mutual feelings of love and respect, both characters cope with their previous traumas of abandonment and loss. As Lina and Florens perform the roles of mother and daughter, respectively, it can be argued that “the concept of motherhood cannot be reduced to a biological function”,⁶⁰ especially in a slaveholding society. As an othermother, Lina helps Florens grow with love and care, a rare experience for a young black girl slave.⁶¹

Even though this article focuses on the positive aspects of motherhood, black mothers are not portrayed as healing and selfless, and thus escapes any idealization of the women characters. Davies emphasizes the need for reformulating the concept of motherhood giving a “greater degree of journeying between patriarchal conceptions of motherhood and women-defined patterns of mothering, in and out of its biological mandates and social constructs”.⁶² Morrison’s *Sula* and *A Mercy* are two novels that challenge conventional portrayals of motherhood. The analysis of different forms of motherhood suggests that there is no fairy tale or an idealized story about mothers in these novels.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Morrison’s *Sula* and *A Mercy* illustrates the complexity of motherhood, challenging stereotypes commonly associated with black mothers and extending notions of mothering beyond biological determinants. This study destabilizes patterns that classify black women characters as simply mother-like or not mother-like. Black mothers cannot be simply judged as good or bad; matriarchs or sexually promiscuous. The various realities of the women characters show the heterogeneous experiences of motherhood under slavery and in post-slavery society. In such a context, motherhood is not limited to biological connections, as different women come to play the roles of mothers and othermothers. In Morrison’s *Sula* and *A Mercy*, motherhood reflects the many possible manifestations of such bonds during slavery and in its aftermath.

⁶⁰ JOSEPH. Black mothers and daughters: their roles and functions in American society, p. 83.

⁶¹ It is worth mention that despite Lina’s support and care, Florens does not overcome her trauma of feeling rejected by her mother. Throughout the narrative this traumatic experience haunts Florens, who in the end, becomes mad. This ending reinforces the idea that instead of depicting a romantic version of mother-daughter bonds, Morrison problematizes women bonds during slavery.

⁶² DAVIES. *Black women, writing and identity: migrations of the subject*, p. 142.

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