Wesleyan University The Honors College

Writing Margaret Garner: Nineteenth Century Sentimental Literature on Margaret Garner and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

by

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Class of 2010

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in _ American Studies_ and _English_

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2010

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Acknowledgements

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First and foremost, I would like to thank Sally Bachner for the immense amount of time and care she put into my thesis. Her kind words and honest criticism gave me a drive that kept me going through the worst nights and enthusiasm to excel through the best. This project would not have developed as far as it did without her wonderful direction.

This work is for my mother. When I was seven, she read me *Wind in the Willows.* I hated the book. So did she. But we didn't tell each other because we didn't want to stop reading for the other one. Thank you for your strength to listen at any hour.

I would like to thank all my friends at Wesleyan who kept me as sane as I could be this past year. Coming home or getting kicked out of the library on a Saturday night, it was nice to do this together.

INTRODUCTION

> *I am interested in what prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from.*
>
> —Toni Morrison
> *Playing in the Dark*

I first became attracted to this project because I wanted to write about *Beloved*. In the process—as with all projects—I found something else. When I first realized that Morrison's protagonist, Sethe, originated from a historical moment, I was shocked, not due to the actuality of the infanticide but because I couldn't imagine a story so vividly drawn existed in another space. Beginning research, I thought I would find a story hardly told. Instead, I encountered a wealth of contemporary literature written by journalists, abolitionists and sentimental authors, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose fictional heroines harnessed the forceful choice of the enslaved mother, Margaret Garner, who protected her children through death, into the mission of the antislavery movement. These works expose a vigorous and quite often contorted effort on the part of the authors to make possible the "process of entering what one is estranged from," molding Margaret Garner's disturbing decision into a palatable expression of maternal love as revered by white antebellum Americans.[1] This project is about that process, the tropes of sentimental literature used to garner sympathy from an ambivalent white readership and turn the nation towards the abolishment of slavery. This project is also about the cost of said process, the stories

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[1] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 4.

erased in the fiction. And through this study, I gained a rich entrance back into *Beloved* and Morrison's complex revision of sentimental literature.

Among all the rewritings on Margaret Garner, no historically complete story of the enslaved mother exists. My project, therefore, does not presume to tell her story but rather explores three fictionalized accounts of the historic Margaret Garner and her story of infanticide: the Cincinnati newspapers, two sentimental authors of the nineteenth century—Harriet Beecher Stowe and Hattia M'Keehan—and Toni Morrison's modern novel, *Beloved*.

Despite insisting on the honesty of their accounts, nineteenth century journalists and authors systematically purged Margaret's story of the disturbing details which could prevent a sympathetic connection from the reader. In doing so the works often reflect fantasies of heroic motherhood constructed from recognizable tropes and fictional characters of sentimental literature. In *Beloved*, Morrison critically engages sentimental literature in order to critique the process of sympathy, but she does so without discarding the notion that a reader can and must connect to the disturbing experience of slavery and the choice of infanticide as represented in her text.

In *Public Sentiments*, Glenn Hendler defines sympathetic connection in nineteenth century sentimental literature as "an emotional response to reading or seeing an expression of another's feelings. It is thus at its core an act of identification" which incites readers to "imagine oneself, at least to some extent, in another's position."[2] By encasing Margaret Garner's story in popular sentimental

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[2] Glenn Hendler and ebrary, Inc, *Public Sentiments Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 3.

literary devices such as the cult of domesticity and "true womanhood," writers incited white audiences of the nineteenth century to recognize the logic of the infanticide by recognizing their own beliefs within the enslaved maternal characters' tragic decision.[3]

In Chapter One, I turn to the renditions of Margaret Garner as found in the Cincinnati local newspapers, *The Cincinnati Gazette* and *The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*. Though these accounts are the closest to a factual portrayal of Margaret Garner, they testify to the need to use rhetorical maneuvers, which often look like outright fictionalization, in order to stabilize the profoundly unnerving facts of the infanticide. Within the articles, Margaret Garner is framed by a number of cultural icons and fictional figures drawn from sentimental literature rather than in relation to the facts of her arrest and trial. The newspapers, however, still provide certain facts erased by the literature which followed. Therefore, the news articles still offer invaluable insight into the process of fictionalization.

In Chapter Two, I present two antislavery sentimental texts on Margaret Garner: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred* and Hattia M'Keehan's *Liberty or Death*. These works, published less than a year after Margaret Garner's decision, reveal the potency of the story for the abolitionist movement. Especially in 1856 when sectional tensions in America were reaching a boiling point, the mother's decision to kill her

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[3] Cindy Weinstein, *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
Cindy Weinstein along with other modern literary scholars argue against the belief that sentimental literature engages in a process of sympathy that involves appropriation of the suffering of the character. I use Glenn Hendler's model of sympathy which insists on a recognition of reader within the character as the reproduced portraits of Margaret Garner from the nineteenth century predominately erased disturbing differences in the story of infanticide which might alienate the white readership. Ultimately most of the fictionalized versions of the Margaret I explore look more akin to free white middle class mothers than an enslaved mother.

children rather than see them enslaved offered a powerful critique of slavery. It was also a potent site where a connection based on an ideal of maternal love could be forged between an ambivalent northern audience and the fictional slave mothers. In order to employ the trope of sympathy to its fullest extent the authors needed to familiarize the audience with the infanticide. Stowe and M'Keehan gain sympathy for their heroines' tragic decisions by exhaustively encasing the slave mothers in ideals of free white society thus creating a "suitable body" for their readers to imagine themselves within.

Using the portraits of Margaret Garner from Chapters One and Two, I explore in Chapter Three Toni Morrison's engagement with the tradition of sentimental literature and the process of sympathy in *Beloved*. Within her complex text, Morrison identifies a problem in the process of sympathy as it operated in the nineteenth century retellings of Margaret Garner's story. By showing how such connection can fail even within a community of former enslaved mothers, all of whom suffered extreme hardships under the institution of slavery, Morrison reveals the psychologically harmful and socially alienating consequences of the literary fantasies abolitionists constructed in order to gain sympathy. In *Beloved*, the members of the community eventually forge a sense of belonging founded not on false and aspirational ideals, but on a shared recognition of the hard realities they face. *Beloved* revises rather than discards the process of sympathy in sentimental literature. Instead of using familiar tropes to allow readers to recognize themselves within her characters, Morrison lets differences and disconnections develop which the reader must decipher and engage with in order to construct the text.

Steven Weisenburger, author of *Modern Medea*, the only biography on Margaret Garner, argues that in the decade after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, "no antebellum case achieved the signal importance of Margaret Garner's." In terms of sheer volume, the material written on Margaret Garner surpassed the even more famous fugitive slave cases of Anthony Burns and Dred Scott.[4] Despite her contemporary fame, I found only three articles and one book on Margaret Garner all of which were written after Morrison's *Beloved*.[5] In *Home Fronts*, Lora Romero argues that by quickly dismissing sentimental literature for upholding coercive ideologies of race and gender, modern critics often fail to fully consider the nineteenth century authors' efforts to vehemently critique American society. Romero writes, "some discourses could be oppositional without being outright liberating."[6] In *Playing in the Dark*, a nonfiction work which excavates the African presence in early American literature, Toni Morrison describes the textual engagement with race, especially in nineteenth century slave narratives, as demonstrating "the inadequacy and the force of the imaginative act."[7] Forceful and inadequate are useful words for probing into the literature on Margaret Garner's infanticide and understanding the

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[4] Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 7.

[5] Mark Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner? Slavery, Silence, and the Politics of Ventriloquism," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 81-119; Sarah N. Roth, "'The Blade Was in My Own Breast': Slave Infanticide in 1850's Fiction," *American Nineteenth Century History* 8, no. 2 (June 2, 2007): 169-185; Cynthia Griffin Wolff, ""Margaret Garner": A Cincinnati Story," *The Massachusetts Review* 32, no. 3 (Autumn 1991): 417-440.
These three articles discussed Margaret Garner in relation to the sentimental literature written on her story of infanticide. I especially relied on Sarah N. Roth's "The Blade Was in My Own Breast" and Mark Reinhardt's "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?." These articles, however, mentioned but did not compare the sentimental literature to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* at length.

[6] Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 4.

[7] Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, xiii.

strengths and limits of the authors' desire to connect their audiences to the antislavery movement at any cost.

CHAPTER ONE

FICTION IN THE PRESS

The Cincinnati Newspaper Accounts of Margaret Garner's Arrest and Trial

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I.

Introduction to the Newspaper Coverage of the Margaret Garner Case

The newspaper coverage of the Margaret Garner case offers an important entrance into my project for two reasons. The news articles are more or less the only "factual" documents surviving on the enslaved mother's story. The newspapers also present remarkable insight into the methods by which sentimental authors, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, elaborate on Margaret's tragedy in antislavery literature (the topic of my Second Chapter). Though newspapers across the country from *The New York Daily Times*, *The Liberator* to *The National Era* followed the story of the famous enslaved mother, I draw my argument from the local Cincinnati newspapers which detail the case daily for two months. Specifically, I use *The Cincinnati Gazette* and *The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* since these newspapers provide the most print coverage, reporting the Garners' arrest, trial and Margaret's ultimate transportation "down river" to a cotton plantation in Louisiana.[1]

The immense quantity of news coverage alone did not make Margaret Garner the mythic public figure she became in the nineteenth century. Rather, an examination

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[1] *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, Jan. 29, 1856- Feb. 27, 1856; *Cincinnati Gazette,* Jan. 29, 1856-Feb. 27, 1856; Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 227.

of these newspapers reveals that rhetorical maneuvers, which often look like an outright fictionalization of the story, account for the enormous power her image wielded at the time. Instead of depicting Margaret in relation to the factual events of her escape and capture in Cincinnati, the articles frame the enslaved mother within a context of cultural icons and fictional heroines already recognizable to the public. In "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner," Mark Reinhardt explains there existed a "need to find an authorizing convention for the telling of this uncomfortable story" and therefore "mass culture did more than provide the occasional reference for thinking about the meaning of the case, it fundamentally structured how the case was perceived, understood and narrated."[2] Writers overwhelmingly turned to the dominant genre of sentimentalism as the "authorizing convention" to "structure" and "narrate" Margaret Garner's infanticide and the mother herself. In this Chapter, I discuss how the newspapers' fictionalization of Margaret Garner foreshadows literary tactics of sympathy heightened and manipulated in the literature which followed the infanticide. Through the process of sympathy, authors constructed Margaret Garner into a powerful maternal figure who connected white readers to the antislavery movement.

Margaret Garner's life as a public figure begins on the pages of the local Cincinnati newspapers, which more or less corroborate the main facts of the arrest and trial. The newspapers, therefore, remain important reminders of the aspects of the story lost in the retelling of her decision to commit infanticide. Since a series of fires in Cincinnati during the early twentieth century destroyed the entirety of the official

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[2] Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?," 101.

court records on the Garner trial, the Cincinnati city newspapers continue to be the only body of work which delivers a fairly historical representation of the story and the only place to find a record of the testimony of Margaret Garner.[3] Considering that sentimental authors in the nineteenth century and Toni Morrison in the twentieth century base their stories on the newspaper accounts, the articles offer road maps back from the major divergences in their fictions. Even though in the articles, Margaret Garner often ceases to exist as an individual and is transformed into a complicated fusion of characters and tropes, the possibility of another story still remains.

II.

The Arrest and the Trial

Before examining the rhetorical tactics of the initial newspaper reports, here are the facts of the arrest and trial which *The Cincinnati Gazette* and *The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* agree upon.

The Arrest

The Gazette and *The Enquirer* present the details of the Garners' arrest as follows: A group of slaves from Boone County, Kentucky, flee their masters' plantations for the free state of Ohio on January 27, 1856. The party includes Margaret Garner, her children, Margaret's husband, Robert Garner, and his parents, Simon and Mary Garner. Archibald Gaines lays claim to Margaret Garner and her

[3] Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 111.

children, Tom, Sam, Mary, and Cilla, who are approximately six, four, three, and nine months old. James Marshall owns Robert and his parents. After crossing the frozen Ohio River on foot, the Garners seek shelter in the house of Margaret's cousin, Joe Kite. As the sun rose the next day, January 28th, 1856, Gaines, Marshall, and a group of federal marshals surround the Kite house to forcibly return the family to slavery. As the white posse attempts to force their way inside, Simon fires a revolver from an open window. He hits one of the marshals, severing two of the marshal's fingers and lodging a bullet in the marshal's upper lip.

Once the articles move into describing the events inside the Kite's house, the newspapers offer an unclear and incomplete portrait. *The Gazette* and *The Enquirer* agree that upon entering the house, the slave catchers discover Mary nearly decapitated on the floor and the three other children showing evidence of wounds as well. None of the authorities can identify Mary's murderer. By now, word reaches the citizens of Cincinnati and a mob forms around the Kite House. As the crowd grows riotous, armed guards must be called in to escort the Garners to the station house. The newspapers report the investigation will continue the next day when the coroner will interrogate each of the marshals and the Garner family members, including the young sons, to determine "whether the father or mother of the child had committed the bloody deed."[4] Both newspapers conclude that excitement grows throughout the city over the thrilling story of the Garners.

On January 30th, *The Gazette* and *The Enquirer* relate that Margaret confesses to killing her daughter. The coroner reports, "Her determination was to have killed all

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[4] *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*. Jan. 29, 1856.

the children and then destroy herself rather than return to slavery."[5] From this point on, the news articles and the literature which follow unequivocally argue that Margaret Garner alone murdered her daughter, Mary.

The Trial

Along with the articles on the sensational arrest, Margaret Garner's trial gained extensive print coverage due to the infanticide. The infanticide posed fundamental problems to the typical legal proceedings of a fugitive slave case since the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 did not stipulate a procedure for the trial of an enslaved person who committed a capital crime on free soil. A central question arose surrounding the case, demanding that the Garners be identified by law as either property or humans. As property, the Garners would be tried under the federal law of the Fugitive Slave Act. As humans, the Garners would bring their case to the Ohio State court for the crime of murder.[6] In *Modern Medea,* Steven Weisenburger writes that Margaret Garner's act of infanticide raised "profound constitutional questions" surrounding the Act such as "Could federal law force Ohio to give up alleged felons because Kentucky law said they were also property? Even when Ohio law expressly prohibited property in human beings? More generally, did constitutional protection of property take precedence over human rights?"[7]

Before continuing with the details of the trial, I want to pause on these central questions. In Chapter Two, I'll discuss the ways in which abolitionists not only write

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[5] *Cincinnati Gazette*, Jan 30. 1856.
[6] "Avalon Project - Fugitive Slave Act 1850," Yale Law School, Lillian Coldman Law Library, *The Avalon Project, Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/fugitive.asp.
[7] Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 111-112.

their Margaret Garner characters as humans but "true women" as well, possessing the ideals American society aspired towards. In doing so, the authors fantasize an accepted humanity of Margaret within a system which continually denies or at least questions the humanity of enslaved people, as blatantly demonstrated by the question of the Garners' status preceding the trial. In *Beloved*, Morrison exposes the physiological costs of both the dehumanizing abuse of the slave masters and the literary tactics employed by nineteenth century sentimentalist authors.

Returning to the facts of the trial, the abolitionist defense lawyer of the Garners, John Jolliffe, attempts to obtain a writ of habeas corpus so the family may be tried as criminals under Ohio State Law. [8] Colonel Chambers, the prosecution lawyer for the slave masters, insists the fugitives be tried as property. While Jolliffe and the Garners wait on the warrant for their criminal trial to be processed, the prosecution succeeds in commencing their trial under the Fugitive Slave Act.[9] As property the Garners possess virtually no rights. The Fugitive Slave Act denies fugitive slaves both the right to a jury and the right to speak in court.[10]

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[8] Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 89-91.
John Jolliffe was the dominant abolitionist lawyer for fugitive slaves in Cincinnati, Ohio. Weisenburger argues, "In 1856, it was understood in Cincinnati's abolitionist and free black communities that 'lawyer Jolliffe' was *always* available for legal aid in matters touching antislavery." A Quaker and philanthropist, Jolliffe conducted most of his antislavery cases pro bono and tirelessly worked for fugitive slave rights despite threats to his life.

[9] *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer,* Jan. 1, 1856- Feb. 27, 1856; *Cincinnati Gazette,* Jan. 1, 1856- Feb. 27, 1856.
Due to the fact the members of the Garner family belong to separate masters, two successive trials occur before the Commissioner Pendery. For the duration of February 1st to February 10th, 1856, the court tries Robert Garner and his parents to determine the validity of Marshall's claim to their persons as property. February 11th, 1856 begins Margaret's trial and the prosecution tries Margaret and her children as the rightful property of Gaines.

[10] "Avalon Project - Fugitive Slave Act 1850." 2008, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/fugitive.asp.
The federal Act dictates Circuit Court appointed Commissioners to act as justices of the peace and singularly rule to immediately free or return any "persons whose service and labor is claimed" to their master.

Here another unique question presents itself: whether Margaret Garner freed herself due to a prior visit to the free state of Ohio or whether she remains property because she returned to the slave state of Kentucky with her master. Jolliffe argues that Margaret's trip as a young girl to Cincinnati to care for the Garners' infant grants her manumission. By determining Margaret's status as a free woman before she had her children, Jolliffe also argues that her children are free since the mother's status determines the child's under slavery.[11] Margaret Garner's trial again defies the norm of fugitive slave trials. While fugitive slaves could not testify for themselves, Jolliffe successfully argues that the Act granted fugitives the right to testify for other enslaved individuals. Margaret, therefore, takes the witness stand to testify for her own freedom in order to establish the freedom of her children. In the newspapers, Margaret's assumption of the witness stand offers a moment to heighten her sense of subjectivity and identity as an ideal mother.[12]

On February 14th, 1856, two weeks after the first day of the trial, a period that greatly exceeded the typical one-day commencement of a fugitive slave trial, Commissioner Pendery announces he requires more time due to the unusual complexity of the case.[13] On the 14th, Lucy Stone also addresses the court on the behalf of the mother. In her dramatic plea for the sympathies of the court, Lucy Stone exemplifies the operations of sentimental literature employed by abolitionists in the rewriting of the Margaret's story. On February 27th, 1856, Commissioner Pendery

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[11] Jeannine Marie DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial: Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 103.
In 1857, the Supreme Court officially declares in the ruling of Dred Scott vs. Sanford that a slave presence on free soil does not emancipate the slave.
[12] *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, Feb. 11, 1856; *Cincinnati Gazette,* Feb. 11, 1856.
[13] Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 112.

declares in favor of the prosecution, returning the entire Garner family to slavery. At this moment, Pendery also overrules the motion to try the Garners as criminals in the State Court, declaring state law as subordinate to federal law. On March 11, 1856, Archibald Gaines sold Margaret Garner "down river." The last news article traced her to a plantation in New Orleans. The details of her life in the south and her date of death remain unknown. [14]

II.

Context for the Fictionalization of Margaret Garner in the Newspapers

Weisenburger argues that by 1856, the infanticidal slave mother had developed into a "potent icon in literature" and part of the American reader's "cultural hardwiring." He continues, "Despite [Margaret Garner's] absolute singularity, antebellum Americans persisted in seeing Margaret as a figure they thought they already knew, through the infanticidal slave mothers in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other tracts."[15] This character became an established trope through sentimental literature in antebellum America, but the story carried certain specific traits not found in Margaret Garner's unique case as reported in the newspaper articles. In the conventional plot, the mother murders her children gently, under the cover of night. Margaret's attack with a knife in light of day and also in the face of

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[14]Ibid., 226, 240.
On March 11, 1856, Margaret Garner resurfaces in the newspapers in another fantastic story. While on route to New Orleans, Margaret Garner reportedly jumped overboard with her infant during a minor collision with another steamship. Her infant dies before the mother and the steamship crew pulls child back aboard. The newspapers portray her decision as another conscious act of infanticide.
[15] Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 247.

slave catchers presented a dramatically more violent and confrontational tale.[16] The most famous story of infanticide in the nineteenth century came from fiction in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Published in 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* introduces the infanticidal mother, Cassy, who kills her son with laudanum while he sleeps. Stowe writes the scene of infanticide as an intimate portrait of a mother and her child alone together; she holds her son to her chest and kisses him before he dies.[17] The newspapers' assumptions that Margaret alone kills her child suggest that literature on infanticidal mothers and most likely the character of Cassy influenced the construction of Margaret's story.

The newspapers continue to bridge the differences between Margaret Garner's specific infanticide and the more familiar trope of the maternal slave character by surrounding the facts of Margaret's story with literary devices of sentiment. Cassy's narrative from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and literary conventions of domesticity and motherhood continually surface in the newspapers' "factual" accounts of the story. To clarify, I focus on the newspapers' constructions of Margaret Garner to establish a sympathetic connection between the reader and the story due to the fact that *The Gazette* and *The Enquirer* predominately portray the mother and infanticide in such a framework of sentimentality. Though some proslavery newspapers depicted Margaret as animalistic and savage, these articles were in the minority as the infanticide more effectively critiqued than supported the slave institution. [18] Reinhardt corroborates the

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[16] Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?," 176.
[17] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism* (New York: Norton, 1994), 318.
[18] Mark Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner? Slavery, Silence, and the Politics of Ventriloquism," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 92; Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea:*

proslavery papers' silence: "Her conduct undercut the very core of the ideology of slavery—the conception of slaves as persons without honor."[19] For at the heart of the violence was a maternal act. Journalists highlighted the sensational motherhood of Margaret, portraying a heroic mother who valued freedom and her daughter's honor over life.[20]

The medium of print was ideal for conveying to the American public a sympathetic portrait of the enslaved mother and, through her, an argument against slavery. In *Slavery on Trial*, Jeannie Marie DeLombard, argues, "During the three decades, leading up to the Civil War, slavery was on trial in the United States." While the judges and juries decided particular cases in court, the public also questioned and judged the institution of slavery by following the cases in newspapers and literature. To create change, DeLombard argues, "Abolitionists redirected the legal tactics of earlier reformers into the mass medium of print, converting antebellum print culture into an alternative tribunal."[21] Merging the potent tropes of sentimental literature into the print, the newspapers often call to the sentiments of the reader and force the reader to act as the juror in deciding the morality of the enslaved mother's decision. Since the Act refused fugitives the right to a jury and placed the responsibilities of the case in the hands of Commissioners (who ruled dominantly in favor of slave masters as such rulings earned a larger payment[22]), abolitionists such as Lucy Stone appealed to the public rather than the court for sympathy. Abolitionists knew that Margaret was

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A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 86.

[19] Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?," 113.

[20] Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?," 92-93; Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 86-88.

[21] DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 1.

[22] DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*. 66-68.

doomed from the trial's commencement. Therefore rather than try to free her, they used the particularity of her case to highlight the urgent need to terminate slavery in order to prevent another mother's hard choice of infanticide.

Emphasizing Margaret's motherhood becomes the means to gloss over the disturbing facts of the case and appeal more generally for the public's sympathy. The presentations of Margaret Garner insist on her possession of sacred motherhood, which slavery in general and the Fugitive Slave Act in particular desecrate. In *Public Sentiments,* Glenn Hendler conveys that the potency of sentimental texts in the nineteenth century rely on familiar sites of recognition. He argues, that sympathy "at its core an act of identification" and in order for the reader to connect to the suffering of the individual the reader must be able to submerge into the identity of the character and imagine undergoing the experience and emotional response.[23] Motherhood acts as such a site to incite a sympathetic connection from a white readership. Despite the infanticide, Margaret's motherhood and maternal love as represented by the newspapers create a familiar site for self-recognition for the public.

A danger in the language of sentimental literature occurs when the reader over-identifies with the sufferer. Glenn Hendler explains, "The risk of sympathy is that the idea that one can feel like another person can be overshadowed by the paradoxically narcissistic and self-negating desire to feel with the other, the share the other's experiences as if they were one's own." If the reader claims the sufferer's experience, then he or she may find pleasure in experiencing self-pity rather than

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[23] Hendler and ebrary, Inc, *Public Sentiments Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 1-9.

compassion for the actual subject.[24] Lucy Stone's speech exposes such a narcissistic reading of Margaret Garner's personal tragedy. More importantly for my discussion of the sentimental literature on Margaret Garner in Chapter Two, Stone's speech foreshadows the elimination of the specifics of Margaret's story in the abolitionist's effort to appeal to public sympathy. The rewriting of Margaret's story often demonstrates the criticism modern scholars apply to sentimental literature. While not all sentimental texts of the nineteenth century engage equally in such appropriation, the works on Margaret expose the tactic of erasing differences which might alienate readers. Therefore these texts transform the enslaved mother into a character reflecting the ideals of white womanhood rather than the realities of her story.

III.

Fictionalization of the Margaret Garner in the Breaking Headline

At the most fundamental level, the fictionalization of the "real" Margaret Garner begins with coverage of the arrest. On January 29th, breaking articles in *The Gazette* and *The Enquirer* report that the identity of the member—or members—of the Garner family who committed the infanticide remains ambiguous. Both papers suggest either the mother or father could have committed the crime. Yet in a bizarre and blatant contradiction to the facts as known on the day of the arrest, *The Gazette* labels Margaret Garner as the murderer of Mary in its headline. A day before the coroner's investigation of Margaret and her confession on January 30th, *The Gazette* proclaims to the public, "Arrest of Fugitive Slaves: A Slave Mother Murders her

[24] Ibid., 1-5.

Child rather than see it Returned to Slavery."[25] While Margaret Garner's confession soon follows, *The Gazette* offers an unjustified certainty over who killed the daughter and why. Though Margaret remains nameless, the headline presumes the mother murders Mary and assumes Margaret's inner thoughts: that she committed the infanticide because she preferred death for her daughter rather than a life enslaved.

Scholars agree that famous literary characters and tropes of sentimental literature influenced journalists' presentations of the Margaret Garner story.[26] The two important assumptions from *The Gazette's* headline, the clear labeling of Margaret as the killer and the suggestive narrative from the mother's thoughts, support such an argument in their reflection of the popular narrative of Cassy. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Cassy resolves to kill her infant son after enduring the sale of her first two children. Cassy confesses her infanticide to Tom, her fellow slave on Legree's plantation. She cries, "O, that child!—How I loved it!" continuing, "But, I had made up my mind,—yes, I had. I would never again let a child live to grow up!"[27] Margaret's reasoning for murder as *The Gazette* attributes in the headline echoes Cassy's rationale: the mother prefers that her children die rather than live under slavery. The narrative in the headline also conveys a sense of maternal protection on the part of Margaret, recalling Cassy's infanticidal protection of her son from sale and moral degradation. The thought process implied in *The Gazette*'s headline grounds Margaret's decision in a maternal logic founded upon love and honor.

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[25] *Cincinnati Gazette*. Jan. 29, 1856.
[26] Roth, "'The Blade Was in My Own Breast': Slave Infanticide in 1850's Fiction."; DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*; Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?"; Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*.
[27] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 318.

No explanation exists for the headline's blatant contradiction of the facts of the case. One possible reason is the narrative of the headline falsely stabilizes the disturbing and chaotic sequence of events leading up to the murder and the murder itself as reported by both *The Gazette* and *The Enquirer*. *The Gazette* reports that the officers enter the Kite house to find all the Garners at the scene of the crime and Mary "lying on the floor dying its head almost entirely off." The officials interview Margaret's surviving boys—Tom who has a four-inch gash on his throat and Samuel who shows a wound upon his skull—and relate the children's statement as, "their folks threw them down and tried to kill them."[28] While the sons' testimony may or may not be accurately transcribed by the reporter, the account clearly reports the boys identifying more than one family member as their attackers.[29] *The Gazette's* identification of Margaret as the murderer erroneously stabilizes the confusing facts with an established plot. The plot contains a familiar killer, the mother, and motive of maternal love which justifies or at least rationalizes the act of violence. As the headline omits Margaret's name in favor of the more general identity of "slave mother," the newspaper similarly abandons the specifics of Margaret's story for a general plot of a fiction.

Such a need for stabilization is particularly reflected in the erasure of her husband Robert Garner, who plays a main role in the violence of the arrest. Both newspapers describe Margaret's husband as aggressively protecting his family by

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[28] *Cincinnati Gazette.* Jan. 29, 1856.

[29] *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*. Jan. 29, 1856.
The Enquirer corroborates, describing the officers' endeavors to discover the mystery of the events within the Kite's house as futile: "after examining five of the parties who first burst into the house, not one of whom could throw any light as to whether the father or mother of the child had committed the bloody deed."

firing upon the approaching posse. *The Enquirer* reports suspecting the father and mother on the first day and the children accuse "their folks," most likely both their parents. Also though Margaret confesses to the infanticide, the sons' testimonies and the confusion of the arrest raise doubts as to whether Margaret murdered Mary or confessed to the coroner under duress. Though Robert emerges in the article as a significant instigator of violence and possible suspect in the murder, the headline places him in the group of indistinct fugitive slaves as detached from the mother.

The terror that violent enslaved men instilled in the public sheds light on the complete excision of Robert from the headline. Joan Hedrick, biographer of *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, explains that black male violence terrified both proslavery advocates and supporters of the abolitionist movement. Especially after Nat Turner led a slave rebellion in 1831, "the fear was so so alive" in the American public of the violent black male. More often than not, Hedrick continues, a heroic black figure in print, such as Uncle Tom, would have to "be feminized and turned into a heroine rather than a hero."[30] While Robert and his attack on the white slave catchers completely disappear from the headline, a maternal heroine emerges. When the entire Garner family, Robert included, go on trial, *The Gazette* and *The Enquirer* never mention Robert's violence, though Margaret's murder repeatedly surfaces in the courtroom. Most importantly, the nineteenth century fictions which follow the story completely erase the father's role and often his very existence. Instead, nineteenth century print

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[30] Joan Hedrick, Personal Interview, (12/04/09).
I would like to thank Joan Hedrick for taking the time to speak with me about my project. Her insight and direction proved invaluable for my work.

embraced a feminized aggression, as framed by maternal motivations of Margaret Garner.

While *The Gazette* neither immediately valorizes nor demonizes Margaret's action, the headline constructs Margaret within the framework of known sympathetic mothers. Due to figures like Cassy, connections between Margaret Garner and an idealized maternal love immediately develop. After Margaret confesses to the crime, journalists and especially abolitionists openly infuse Margaret's infanticide with a sense of heroic motherhood which justifies and celebrates her violent act. Her decision fits within the boundaries of "true womanhood and motherhood" when encased within the ideals of domesticity and sentimentalism as revered in antebellum America.

IV.

Margaret Garner Testifies

The sentimental construction of Margaret Garner's maternal love plays out in the courtroom through her ability to testify on behalf of her children. Jolliffe vehemently argues for Margaret's right to testify, which the prosecutor Chambers matches with an equally fierce attempt to halt her testimony. Chambers contends that Margaret's story would garner a sympathetic response from the Commissioner and sway the decision through sentiments rather than law. Colonel Chambers responds, "[The case] has its painful aspects. It has its reasons for an appeal to the sympathies

of everyone with which the Commissioner has nothing to do."[31] Chambers exposes a fear reflected in the proslavery newspapers' silence on the case; the story powerfully conveys a noble and tragic decision made by a mother to save her children from horrors worse than death. Chambers acknowledges that "the sympathies" associated with her story of motherhood also appeal to general public, revealing the power the trope of motherhood possessed in the nineteenth century to connect a white audience to Margaret Garner.

In her testimony, Margaret's words reflect an interesting and unsatisfying lack of emotion as she can only speak to basic facts of her visit to Ohio as a child to care for the Garners' infant. She cannot address the infanticide or provide a justification for her escape and murder. The court only allows a brief and straightforward testimony. In one detail from her testimony, Margaret states, "During that time [the Garners] spent one day, and they brought me over to nurse the baby; that was Mary Garner. Mary wasn't quite as large then as my baby."[32] In comparison to the persona attributed to her by the newspapers, Margaret does not express a mythic motherhood or intensely emotional descriptions of her children. The influence of the white court obviously controls her words, but the difference highlights the degree to which abolitionists fictionalized her story.

The newspapers add subjectivity to Margaret when she assumes the witness stand and in doing so add commentary to personhood and her act of infanticide, which Margaret herself is not allowed to express. Before Margaret Garner assumes the stand, *The Gazette* includes a vignette on her appearance for the reader:

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[31] *Daily Enquirer*, Feb. 1, 1856.
[32] *Cincinnati Gazette,* Feb. 8, 1856. *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer,* Feb. 8, 1856.

> She was dressed in a dark calico, with a small handkerchief on her shoulders, pinned closely around her neck, and a yellow cotton handkerchief was wrapped turban like or *a la ole Virginy* around her head. The child in her arms is a little girl about nine months old and is much lighter in color.[33]

The description of Margaret when she assumes the stand offers an initial model of the societal ideals attached to Margaret and heightened by abolitionist authors in the sentimental fiction following the trial. The description also provides insight back to another story of an enslaved experience. A sense of idealized motherhood surfaces in her cradling of her infant but more so from the infant's fairer skin. The article continues to describe Margaret as exhibiting a gloomy and depressed visage that only changes to a glimmer of a smile when looking at her angelic child. Her child bolsters her maternity and the article's praise of the infant's skin color seems to reflect onto the mother. In the literature I discuss in Chapter Two, the authors, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Hattia M'Keehan, instill their Margaret Garner characters with white ideals, even textually lightening her skin color.

The passage also heightens the sense of Margaret's domesticity through her dress. The attention to her clothes emphasizes her femininity but also convey a sense of her servitude. Her demure calico and pinned handkerchief convey a sense of her as submissive servant, possibly to dispel the image of her as a murderer. The fictional literature that surrounds Margaret places the infanticidal heroines in the domestic sphere but not through work. In order to connect the readers to their characters, M'Keehan and Stowe present characters more akin to free white middle class women in control of domestic spheres rather than enslaved women caring for their mistresses'

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[33] *Cincinnati Gazette*, Feb. 11, 1856.

homes. Such a moment on the witness stand points back to another story as seen in the newspapers. Margaret's slave masters saw her as property, to work for their home and family. Margaret exposes in her testimony a possession of a type of eternal motherhood but one grounded in her masters' control over her. As a young girl, Margaret must "mother" and care for the Garner's infant. The feminine and maternal characteristics writers idolized in Margaret's story transform her into a portrait more akin to a free woman than an enslaved woman.

The Gazette's stressed reference to "*Virginy*" demonstrates another important idealization attached to Margaret's story. "*Virginy*" alludes to the mythic tale of the ancient Roman father, Virginius, a reference made by both newspapers at different moments and repeatedly employed by abolitionists to insist on the valor of Margaret's decision. In the story of Virginius, the noble Roman solider stabs his daughter, Virginia, to death to save her from rape. His decision arises from his ultimate desire to protect his daughter's honor and prevent a life worse than death, which Virginius argues comes with a loss of purity.[34] Particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century the Roman myth developed into a popular tale acted upon the stage and reprinted in literature.[35] The American audience would have likely recognized the

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[34]Thomas Babington Macaulay Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome: With "Ivry" and "The Armada."* (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1851).
The wealthy Patrician Claudius spies the beautiful and young virgin Virginia, daughter of Virginius, walking to school. Claudius decides to enslave Virginia in order to rape her. When Virginius determines Claudius's intention, Virginius steals Virginia away to hide in a decaying wood. Virginius laments that he never desired money but was the happiest in Rome because of his model daughter. The father cries over his daughters' impending dishonor, "Still let the bridegroom's arms enfold an unpolluted bride. / Spare us the inexpiable wrong, the unutterable shame." Virginia ascribes Virginia's purity as her greatest honor. To save such honor, Virginius stabs her to death. When the public discovers the infanticide, a crowd forms and enacts revenge on Claudius, sending him "hell."
[35] Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 33.
Works such as Thomas Macaulay's novel, *Lays of Ancient Rome* and James Knowles's play, *Virginius: A Tragedy in Five Acts,* become bestsellers in America. Weisenburger writes A review on Knowles's

allusion to the Roman story and felt the positive and sympathetic connotation suggested by it.

Mark Reinhardt argues that the use of Virginius to describe Margaret navigates the disturbing aspects of the infanticide. It transforms the violence into an expression of heroism, which Virginius, "the quintessential subject of honor, a man who understands there are things worse than death, things worth the deliberate sacrifice of human life," represents.[36] While Hattia M'Keehan attaches the Roman senator to her Margaret Garner character in her novella, *Liberty or Death*, the allusion to Virginius in the newspapers proves an important site for the conflation of masculine rhetoric with the language of motherhood that continues in sentimental literature.[37] Reinhardt argues that in order to draw upon the full potency of the story for the abolitionist movement, "it was necessary to draw on the heroic connotations" of the male hero "while also domesticating it."[38] Margaret literally wears both femininity and masculinity by having her hair wrapped "*a la ole Virginy*."

Just as Margaret's dress is a reminder of her enslavement, the conflation of the names Virginius and Virginia is also a disturbing reminder of her own rape. Margaret is both Virginius and Virginia, both protecting her daughter from rape and being threatened by rape (which Margaret's master had done). The newspapers' use of the term "Virginy" reminds the reader of her attempt to save her children; the articles also portray Margaret's children as fairer than their mother and father, exposing Archibald

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play in *The New York Tribune* identifies the tale of Virginius "as one of the most touching and effective of the recent tragedies."

[36] Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?." 96-97.

[37] *Internet Archive: Free Download: Liberty or death, or, Heaven's infraction of the fugitive slave law*, 10, http://www.archive.org/details/libertyordeathor00mkee.

[38] Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?," 97.

Garner's sexual exploitation. In the following literature written on her, writers gloss over or completely erase Margaret's own sexual violation.

Joan Hedrick argues that in emphasizing the subjectivity of enslaved individuals, abolitionist insisted on their spirituality, a possession of "souls," to an audience which questioned not only the morality but also the humanity of enslaved persons. In doing so, Hedrick continues, abolitionists forced the public to confront the unethical nature of a system which enslaves such individuals.[39] Margaret Garner's story required readers to realize the hypocrisy of enslaving a mother who valued honor and love for her children and the destructive nature of a system which forces that mother to make the ultimate decision of protecting her child through death. The contrast between Margaret's testimony and the descriptions of her in print remind the reader that while Margaret probably holds dear maternal love, these emotions and ideals are added in writing.

V.

Lucy Stone: A White Mother Speaks for Margaret Garner

On the last day of the trial, the white abolitionist, Lucy Stone, dramatically enters the courtroom to speak for Margaret Garner.[40] *The Gazette* and *The Enquirer* report on rumors that Stone visited the mother in jail and offered her a knife to finish the deed she started. Stone asks to speak after the Commissioner leaves and the court officially adjourns, demonstrating DeLombard's argument that when abolitionists

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[39] Joan Hedrick, Personal Interview, (12/04/09).

[40] Though Lucy speaks for herself and the newspapers report her speech, I include her words as they reach the public through the news articles on her.

spoke for enslaved persons they directed their arguments to the general public rather than the Commissioner presiding over the case at hand. Stone then proclaims that she knows from her visit that the mother killed her children out of a "deep maternal love" Stone herself understands and with which she sympathizes. In doing so, Stone describes the process of sympathy desired from reading in sentimental literature. In fact, Lucy conveys to the packed courtroom, she "read" Margaret Garner in their meeting in the jailhouse:

> When I came here and saw that poor fugitive, took her toil-hardened hand and read in her face deep suffering and an ardent longing for freedom, I could not help but bid her be of good cheer. I told her that a thousand hearts were aching for her, and they were glad one child of hers was safe with the angels. Her only reply was a look of deep despair—of anguish such as no words can speak.[41]

Lucy "reads" Margaret's "deep suffering" and responds that the mother should be of "good cheer." Jane Tompkins argues in *Sensational Designs* that sentimental literature sought a "change of heart" rather than concrete actions such as legal reform. Tompkins continues that sentimental writers, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, insisted the enactment of social change follows "feeling right." Only after individuals feel morally right and sympathize with the conditions of enslaved people will the nation begin to end slavery. Lucy Stone's call for Margaret's "good cheer" reflects the importance of her story as producing sympathy rather than her personhood. Margaret Garner's story as read in the newspapers already inspired "a thousand" Americans to undergo "changes of heart," or at least elicit public sympathy for a mother's choice. While modern readers often harshly criticize the transformative power of sympathy,

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[41] *The Cincinnati Gazette.* February 14, 1856.

Tompkins explains that the nineteenth century saw sympathy "as the necessary precondition for sweeping social change," and sentimental literature as the force to "change the entire world."[42]

The "aching hearts," however, also point to an over identification through sympathy that Hendler warns against. Lucy Stone indicates that the "aching hearts" should make Margaret have "good cheer" since the reader feels "glad" one of her children resides in heaven. Stone claims the Margaret's pain for herself and the readers. The feelings of anguish from enslavement and the vindication of the infanticide now belong to the public (whether or not such sentiments ever first existed in Margaret). Though Stone and other abolitionists utilize her story to fiercely critique slavery, they also claim the story for their own retelling. Perhaps best explained in Lucy's insistence that Margaret offers no words, Margaret's emotions as she felt them never directly reached the public.

VI.

A Story Lost

In his biography of Margaret Garner, *Modern Medea*, Steven Weisenburger argues, "[Margaret's] child-murder put a name and face of a real black woman to what had mainly been a fantasized image circulated for decades among genteel white abolitionists."[43] I argue that the "fantasized images" circulating in print from "genteel white abolitionists" in fact drew a "name" and "face" for Margaret Garner while

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[42] Jane P Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 131-133.
[43] Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 246.

Margaret herself dissolved into a general narrative of fictional infanticidal enslaved mothers. The abolitionists' mission to change the sentiments of the nation through their sympathetic maternal characters occurred at the cost of any real attention to Margaret Garner herself. Her views, her motives, are all but occluded in the aftermath of her arrest. The "factual" Margaret Garner remains unknown to modern readers as she was to her contemporary public. Wiesenberger's statement not only oversimplifies the retelling of Margaret's story but also misreads the reconstruction of Margaret's identity by the fiction which framed her, a process I explore in the next Chapter. While openly alluding to the famous infanticidal mother, the fictional stereotypes and myths of infanticide abolitionists employ in sentimental literature overshadow Margaret's presence in the story. Both forceful and inadequate, the works I discuss present idealized fictional mothers who are unequivocally justified in killing their children to protect them from the horrors of a life enslaved.

Before moving on, I would like to draw upon one story erased both in *The Gazette*'s headline and the literature which followed. Instead of a mother alone determining to kill her children, the depiction inside the Kite's house shows the entire family involved in or at least present at the murder. Though the headline's assumption of Margaret's culpability concurs with the coroner's report, the articles depict her as surrounded by her family rather than isolated during the infanticide. Due to the horrific realities of slavery, mothers—and all enslaved individuals—often lived alienated from their family members as masters sold or killed them at will. Margaret, however, has at the moment of murder a family which she loses. Robert Garner, especially, becomes erased from the abolitionists' renditions of the story as well as

from the shed scene in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Though also inadequate, the newspapers present their own forceful story.

CHAPTER TWO

CREATING THE "SUITABLE BODY" FOR SYMPATHY

Nineteenth Century Sentimental Literature on Margaret Garner

I.

Introduction To the Literature

In the wake of the escalating violence in America during the 1850's, antislavery authors actively sought slave stories to fictionalize into sensationalist propaganda for the abolitionist movement. The authors hoped to use their sentimentalist literature to turn an ambivalent and inactive white northern readership against the South's "peculiar institution." The year of 1856 particularly highlighted the need for a national answer to the question of slavery. The same year that Margaret Garner escaped across the Ohio River, John Brown raided a proslavery settlement in Kansas, Preston Brooks beat Charles Sumner with a cane on the Senate floor and Harriet Beecher Stowe's brother instructed his Brooklyn congregation to send guns disguised as "Beecher's Bibles" to abolitionists in Kansas.[1] Margaret Garner's decision to commit infanticide rather than return her children to slavery answered the

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[1] Sarah N. Roth, "The Blade Was at My Breast: Slave Infanticide in 1850's Fiction," *American Nineteenth Century History 8*, no. 2, (June 2007), 170.
DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 150.

abolitionists' search for a sensational story in order to stress the urgent need for the country to address the consequences of slavery.

The immediate fictionalization of Margaret Garner confirms the potency of her story for the abolitionist cause. In 1856, less than a year after Margaret's trial, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Hattia M'Keehan created powerful fictional stories of enslaved mothers based on Margaret Garner, condemning the slave system through infanticide. Stowe in her novel *Dred* and M'Keehan in her novella, *Liberty or Death* both wrote in the popular and powerful genre of sentimental literature. In order to employ the literary influence of sentimentalism to the fullest extent, the authors needed to represent their heroines' race, gender and, most importantly, act of infanticide in ways that established and maintained their connection to their white audience. In "The Blade Was in My Own Breast," Sarah N. Roth explains that once authors, "instilled their Margaret Garner characters with more acceptable racial and gendered qualities—once they had fashioned a suitable body for their protagonists to inhabit—white northerner readers could more safely empathize with the plight of an infanticide slave mother."[2] The "suitable body" constructed for their characters emulated the white ideals of womanhood and motherhood as found in the pages of sympathy producing texts.

The feminine genre of sentimental literature dominated the print market during the nineteenth century. In *Public Sentiments*, Glenn Hendler claims, "The nineteenth century American novel was most often conceived as a public instrument designed to play in a sentimental key." The private world of sentiment and feelings, a

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[2] Roth, "The Blade Was at My Breast," 173.

space controlled by women in the domestic sphere, entered the public culture through literature most often produced by women, though male authors also deployed it. More so than men and even preachers, nineteenth century society turned to women for enlightenment on how to "feel right."[3] The feminine sentimental works used sympathy to connect the reader to the suffering of the character and align the reader with the political sentiments of the author.

As I describe in the Introduction, Hendler argues that sympathy at its core is "an act of identification" which requires the reader to imagine himself or herself in the character's position of suffering. Though sympathetic literature is subject to scrutiny and criticism today, Hendler insists that Americans in the nineteenth century largely believed it had the power to bridge the gap of experience between the reader and the fictional victim. Sympathy, therefore, became one of the primary tropes antislavery literature used to bond white northern readers with slaves. In an extreme example, Charles Stowe, Harriet Beecher Stowe's grandson, claimed his mother's sentimental novels could cause the reader to feel the whip of the slave master.[4]

While these authors assumed that readers could connect to the foreign experience of slavery through sentimental literature, the abolitionist writers still needed to provide a familiar route to self-recognition in order to successfully generate sympathy. The revered nineteenth century ideologies surrounding the cult of domesticity and republican motherhood were central to the project of sentimental affiliation of Stowe and M'Keehan. While working within often conservative and racist limits of the nineteenth century literature, Stowe and M'Keehan found space to

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[3] Hendler and ebrary, Inc, *Public Sentiments Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 1-3.
[4] Ibid., 9.

connect white readers to their revolutionary enslaved characters. Wrapping their heroines within the white ideals of "true womanhood and motherhood," Stowe and M'Keehan constructed familiar characters for their audience.

In "The Cult of True Womanhood." Barbara Welter outlines the four cardinal virtues of a "true woman" living in the nineteenth century as "purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity." Purity especially defined a "true woman." Welter explains that the absence of purity made a woman "unnatural and unfeminine."[5] Purity created rigid boundaries, but a woman within the boundaries gained the highest status possible for a woman in society. Purity also manifested itself in the proper piety and maternal love which a woman imparted to her domestic sphere. In order to remain pure and protect her maternal love, Welter argues, women needed to be passive, remaining within their sheltered domestic spheres, rather than active agents in the public world of politics and economics.[6] Stowe and M'Keehan insist upon their enslaved mothers' sexual purity in order to ensure their readers realize the heroines' rightful existence within the boundaries of "true womanhood" and thereby the immorality of the slave institution which threatens their purity. By Welter's definition, the infanticide pushes the mother characters outside the boundaries due to the activist nature of the violence taken against their children; through infanticide the mothers actively defied the system of slavery that held their family.

Since Welter's 1966 article, scholars have reexamined her pillars of "true womanhood," particularly in terms of the presumed submissiveness of domestic heroines. In *Domestic Devils, Battlefield Angels*, Barbara Cutter explains that gender

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[5] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 152.
[6] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood." 162.

ideology of the nineteenth century judged individual women by their ability to use their special feminine moral, religious, and nurturing nature to actively redeem others, especially children. These ideal mothers, often called republican mothers, gained a specific feminine obligation in the nineteenth century to support and improve American society through their children. By instilling proper maternal love and morals into their children, mothers created valuable citizens, shaping ethical politicians in their sons and new republican mothers in their daughters. A mother's role in the home not only affected her immediate surroundings but also impacted the entire nation.[7] In *Private Woman, Public Stage*, Mary Kelley quotes Terhune's popular domestic advice which considered mothers "the architects of the nation's fortunes; the sculptors, whose fair or foul handiwork is to outlast their age, to outlive Time, to remain through all Eternity."[8] Ideal women needed to actively control and thereby also protect their domestic spheres in order to ensure the perfect moral upbringing of their children.

Maternal love was considered a mother's strongest asset in protecting her children from moral corruption. "True" maternal love as produced by the cult of domesticity consisted of two main components: Christian love and love of American virtue. Feminist scholar, Jan Lewis, in "Mother's Love," argues that maternal advice literature of the nineteenth century equated a "mother's work to that of Christ" and argued that mothers who employed their moral authority and nurturing love would

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[7] Barbara Cutter, *Domestic Devils, Battlefield Angels: The Radicalism of American Womanhood, 1830-1865* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 3-17.
[8] Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 275.

provide salvation for their children's souls and "redeem the world."[9] The particular "world" in mind was American society. A mother's nationalist love and love of liberty instilled the principles of the nation's founders in the next generation. Maternal love created a woman's utmost obligation as mothers were not only responsible for the physical welfare of her children but controlled the wellbeing of their souls. [10] An institution like slavery, which threatened freedom and morality, demanded that ideal mothers protect their children from such degradation. Such mothers understood that the ultimate execution of maternal love included a willingness to sacrifice herself for her child.

Abolitionists employed these ideals in popular sentimental texts before 1856 in order to create sympathy for the slave characters and to familiarize white readers with the completely alien experience of slavery. In retelling Margaret Garner's infanticide, Stowe and M'Keehan drastically heightened the ideals of white motherhood within their infanticidal heroines in order to maintain the sympathetic connection with the reader. For at the core of the Margaret Garner story stands an irrefutably "un-maternal" act of violence against her children, one easily able to alienate a nineteenth century white reader from sympathy. Sarah N. Roth argues that the infanticide was the point when the authors feared losing the connection between the white reader and their Margaret Garner characters. If the reader thought the infanticidal slave mother had "no maternal feeling," that the mother could not coexist with whites in a "civilized society." Roth continues that characters underwent a

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[9] Jan Lewis, "Mother's Love: The Construction of an Emotion in Nineteenth-Century America," Ed. Rima D Apple, Janet Golden, *Mothers & Motherhood: Readings in American History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997).
[10] Ibid.

textual "whitening" in order to maintain self-recognition between the reader and the infanticidal enslaved mothers.[11] The heroines in the texts by Stowe and M'Keehan often look more like free white middle class mothers than Margaret Garner as depicted in the newspaper accounts. With the "proper" traits, abolitionists' Margaret Garner characters could commit infanticide and still emulate ideals of motherhood American society aspired towards. [12]

II.

Introduction to Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Dred*

Uncle Tom's Cabin sold a million and a half copies in the first year of publication, more than any other book besides the Bible in the nineteenth century. Stowe biographer, Joan Hedrick, states, "The literary success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made Harriet Beecher Stowe the single most powerful voice on the behalf of the slave."[13] Hailed by many of her contemporaries as the greatest American author, Stowe has been studied by modern scholars for the ways in which she constructed her

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[11] Roth, "The Blade Was At My Breast," 170, 174.

[12]Eve Allegra Raimon, *The "tragic Mulatta" Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2004).
I decided not to draw into this project an assessment of the stories in relation to the popular trope of the era, the "tragic mulatta." In *The Tragic Mulatta*, Eva Allegra Raimon outlines the typical plot line: The light skinned enslaved heroine falls victim to the auction block when tragedy befalls her white benefactor. The sexual exploitation that awaits her drives her mad. The tragedy of the genre arises from the sexual vulnerability of the heroine, a theme massively popular for books with white heroines as well. The sexual victimization of women often transcended race. Both Cora in *Dred* and Gazella in *Liberty or Death* demonstrate these traits. This would have been an interesting entrance into a discussion of whether these characters ever could be actually accepted into the boundaries of the cult of womanhood or if the heroine's mixed race would have been incite anxiety as well as compassion in their readers. I eventually decided to exclude this argument as I consider the infanticides of Gazella and Cora as enacted not out of madness but constructed within a framework that insisted the murders as expressions of familiar maternal love.

[13] Joan D Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 233-234.

slave characters and relationships. Stowe's representations offer crucial insight into the literary tactics abolitionists applied when narrating stories of slaves. DeLombard argues that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* not only made Stowe the "era's best known advocate for the slave," but places Stowe in modern scholarship as central "to debates over the politics of representative identity within the antislavery movement."[14] Harriet Beecher Stowe's literature specifically reveals the employment of the cult of domesticity and "true womanhood" in order to connect white readers to the slave characters and to incite outrage against the slave institution.

Four years after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and less than a year after the Garner trial, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote her second novel, *Dred*. In *Dred,* Stowe includes a heroic character, Cora Gordon, based on Margaret Garner. The national fame Margaret's story gained by the time of *Dred's* publication would have made the capture, murder and trial of Cora an identifiable allusion to the Garner case. Within *Dred*, Stowe also cites the newspaper articles on Margaret Garner in the footnotes.[15] The events of Cora's plot closely follow the newspaper coverage. Like Margaret Garner, Cora Gordon flees to Cincinnati with her children. When slave catchers and city marshals attempt to retrieve her family back to the bonds of slavery, Cora kills her children. She then undergoes a trial for her escape and murder.

While retaining the essential act of infanticide, Stowe constructs a background and persona for Cora entirely different from the newspaper accounts of the famous slave mother. Stowe envelops Cora in the white ideologies of purity and piety to the point her heroine resembles an idealized white middle class woman more

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[14] DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 157.

[15] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 610n3.

than a woman enslaved. In writing Cora within the boundaries of the nineteenth century ideals of womanhood, Stowe invites white readers to aspirationally recognize themselves in Cora despite her infanticide. Even after the crime, Stowe maintains and strengthens Cora's "true womanhood" and her connection with the reader. The reader's potential self-recognition in Cora oddly contrasts with the infanticidal slave mother, Cassy, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s, who must undergo a spiritual conversion before regaining her identity as a "true woman." I argue that the immediacy of the reader's identification with Cora reflects the urgency of the conflicts over slavery erupting across the country and Stowe's own questioning of the effectiveness of "feeling right."

The plot of *Dred* revolves around the life of the Gordon family. The head of the family and master of the Gordon plantation, Colonel Gordon, fathers Harry and Cora Gordon with one of his slaves. He also fathers two legitimate heirs, Nina and Tom Gordon. Nina Gordon assumes the family plantation when her father dies. Nina first appears as a beautiful and shallow character but matures into a "true woman" of the nineteenth century after a cholera epidemic sweeps through North Carolina and Nina sacrifices herself to nurse her slaves. On her deathbed, Nina commands her beloved, Edward Clayton, to care for her slaves.[16] Edward then dedicates himself to her wish, specifically trying to protect Harry and Cora Gordon from the brutality of Tom Gordon.

Concurrent with Stowe's romantic plot of Nina and Edward's courtship, *Dred* presents complex portraits of the noncompliant slaves. The title character, Dred,

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[16] Ibid., 381.

murders his overseer and travels the swamps of North Carolina and Virginia, building a community of fugitive slaves.[17] In a very different experience, Cora Gordon also commits an act of violence. Cora's cousin falls in love with Cora, then emancipates and marries her. When Cora's husband dies, Tom Gordon attempts to re-enslave Cora and her children in order to claim her value as property and object of sexual desire. To protect her children from slavery, Cora kills them and then stands trial.

Any Mother Would Have Done the Same: Immediate Sympathy in *Dred*

Stowe enacts a complicated combination of sympathy and criticism of the slave system with her Margaret Garner heroine. Cora Gordon possesses intrinsic qualities of "true womanhood" which invite the white reader to easily connect with her character. Though born the slave of her father, Cora grows up with the luxuries of a middle class lifestyle. Cora lives with her half aunt, Mrs. Stewart, who treats Cora as her own child and gives Cora the opportunity to develop into an accomplished lady. Cora's inherent femininity, however, is more important than the external talents she gains. When describing Cora's upbringing, Harry proclaims that no amount of instruction could teach a woman to sing like Cora. He continues by recounting that her beauty, gracefulness and genius arise from nature. Once Mrs. Stewart dies, Cora finds herself vulnerable to her white cousin and master, George Stewart. Harry states that when Mrs. Stewart died "there [Cora] was."[18] Harry's brief and stark statement

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[17] Stowe, *Dred*, 551; DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 157.
Scholars argue that Stowe conflates Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner into her character, Dred. Though Stowe might have known about the Dred Scott case, which began to receive national press in 1856, her title character most likely resembles both Vesey and Turner. In the appendix of *Dred,* Stowe includes "The Confessions of Nat Turner."
[18] Stowe, *Dred*, 62.

encapsulates Cora's tragedy. Simply being present places Cora in the position to fall victim to the masculine cruelty of the slave master despite her demonstration of proper femininity.

Becoming the mistress of her cousin should discredit Cora's identity as a "true woman" but Stowe continues to represent Cora as pure. Harry describes how a wave of small pox strikes the Stewart plantation,

> The negroes were all frightened to death, as usual; overseer ran off. Well, then Cora Gordon's blood came up; she nursed [George Stewart] all through his sickness. What's more, she had influence to keep order on the place; got the people to get the cotton crops themselves.[19]

Cora demonstrates the ultimate quality of a "true woman" through her complete willingness to sacrifice herself in order to save others. When both George's white overseer and black slaves abandon George, Cora remains to nurse the sick George back to health. Cora's instinct to care for George naturally arises, like her beautiful voice, from her core. "True womanhood" runs in Cora's blood and cannot be suppressed during times of moral crisis.

Cora's assumption of the role as the domestic angel also "whitens" or distances Cora from the other slaves characters. Harry's assertion of Cora's full name gives her a separate identity and also destroys any sense of kinship between Cora and the other enslaved people, who are categorized as "frightened" "negroes." Though the reader knows Cora shares the skin color of the other slaves, the words on the page separate her from them. The statement that "Cora's blood came up" describes Cora's bravery but also alludes to her blood connection to the white Gordon family. Cora's

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[19] Ibid,. 63.

"white" blood arises in the time of crisis and allows her to fully enact a "true womanhood" linked with white ideals of the era.

Cora's redemption of the Stewart plantation bizarrely foreshadows the moral transformation of Stowe's white heroine Nina. During her own plantation epidemic, Nina gains proper femininity which cleanses herself of her shallow past. Nina dies as a domestic angel, imparting morality on her deathbed to Edward, whom she asks to "take care of my poor people."[20] Cora's experience also proves to be "purifying" in the sense that she reenters the boundaries of white womanhood despite her past of being George's mistress. Cora saves George's body but also his soul: After witnessing Cora's nurturing and feminine power, he lawfully marries and emancipates her. By marrying the father of her children, Cora commands treatment like a middle class white woman rather than a slave. Cora not only shares "true womanhood" qualities with Nina, she literally assumes the role of a white mistress. Cora first upholds the plantation life, acting as an overseer herself, and, after her marriage to George, becomes the mistress of his wealthy household in Ohio. The excessive encasement of Cora within ideals of womanhood forcefully bonds her to a white readership.

Cora's marriage and middle class status create a major divergence between Cora and the famous infanticidal enslaved mother, Cassy, from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Though Cassy also possesses a type of sexual purity under slavery, living like man and wife with her first master, the marriage is never consummated. Joan Hedrick offers insight into the difference, stating that Stowe "upgrades Cora in class and

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[20] Stowe, *Dred*, 381.

gentility [from Cassy] in order to foreground the violent story" of Margaret Garner circulating in the many newspapers.[21] Cassy must undergo a spiritual conversion at the conclusion of the novel before the reader fully connects to her story, a comparison I will return to. Stowe's initial construction of Cora, on the other hand, immediately demands that the reader identify with her, a connection maintained through the infanticide.

Cora decides to kill her children when the brutal slave master, Tom Gordon, attempts to re-enslave Cora's family and destroy her rights to ideal motherhood. Cora's crime of infanticide could seriously threaten her identity as a "true woman" on many levels. She commits a maternal sin, threatens her purity and disrupts the balance of her domestic sphere. Stowe confronts the infanticide with the same domestic rendering she employs when introducing Cora, making the murder of her children a reflection, rather than a contradiction, of the ideals of the cult of domesticity and accepted social norms. After establishing the connection between the reader and Cora before the infanticide, Stowe pushes the reader to maintain a bond and feel outrage toward the injustices of enslaving an ideal woman like Cora.

In her jail cell for the crime of infanticide, Cora upholds the ideologies of "true womanhood" to a point she transforms her space into a domestic sphere. The intrinsic nature of her white middle class identity becomes apparent to the white characters who visit her, the hero Edward Clayton and a preacher: "When they entered her cell, she rose to receive them with the most perfect composure, as if they

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[21] Joan Hedrick, Personal Interview, (12/04/2009).

had called upon her in a drawing-room."[22] Again, Cora's "blood rises" as she rises to meet the men in jail as a "true woman." Edward reads Cora's aura as a mistress of a household receiving him, the white gentleman. Her "true womanhood" and attachments to domesticity actually become stronger when offset by the space of the cell. By transforming her space through her composure, Cora defies the institutions, both jail and slavery, which hold her and insists that she belongs in the domestic sphere. Her "perfect composure" persuades the reader to listen to the logic of her infanticide since she remains a "true woman" even when within a jail cell for the crime of infanticide.

The sentimental language which frames Cora's account of the infanticide allows the murder to function as a sympathetic device which strengthens, rather than weakens, the connection to a white readership. During her trial, Cora takes the witness stand and openly admits to killing her children:

> So I heard them say their prayers and sing their hymns, and then, while they were asleep and didn't know it, I sent them to lie down in green pastures with the Lord. They say this is a dreadful sin. It may be so. I am willing to lose my soul to have *theirs saved*.[23]

Cora's act does not read as a violent murder. In fact, Cora's infanticide is so gentle and devoid of pain that her children do not wake up. They fall asleep on earth and move into heaven still asleep. The ambiguous moment which closest indicates the children's death occurs when Cora states, "I sent them to lie down in the green pastures," the green pastures indicating heaven. Cora never raises a weapon but rather wills her children to death through prayer. The language of the infanticide recalls both

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[22] Stowe, Dred, 440.
[23] Stowe, *Dred*, 440.

Psalm Twenty Three, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want/ He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,"[24] and the popular 18th century children's prayer from the New England Primer: "Now I lay me down to sleep/ I hope the Lord my soul shall keep/ Should I die before I wake/ I pray the Lord my soul to take.[25] Since Cora never establishes the how and when of the murder, the infanticide reads as action in between praying and murdering.

The religious imagery in Cora's account of the infanticide reflects the nineteenth century belief that mothers held a moral authority over preachers and aligned their maternal guidance with Christ. Rather than merely repeating the prayer, Cora fulfills it. Cora enacts "I pray the Lord my soul to take" by sending her children's souls into heaven before they awake into slavery and moral corruption. Earlier in her testimony, Cora argues her children's future in slavery would mean their moral deaths; therefore she fulfills her responsibility as an ideal mother by claiming her children's souls for the Lord. Cora offers spiritual salvation to her children, absolving her of the sin of murder. Cora confirms her faithfulness to the cult of domesticity by exhibiting her Christ-like nature, thus solidifying the bond of sympathy with the white readership.

While Cora removes the violence from the scene of infanticide and obscures the moment of murder, she strongly establishes her presence during their deaths. Cora states, "I heard," "I sent them," and "I am willing to lose my soul." Along with the divine authority, her actions read as extremely familiar. The image of Cora watching over her children conflates the infanticide with routine maternal supervision. During

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[24] Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, *The Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 651.
[25] Paul Leicester Ford, *The New England primer* (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1899), 97.

the nineteenth century the identity of the mother was powerfully linked to her child; a child's morality reflected the mother's teachings and her own morality.[26] Simply put, the children's knowledge of proper prayers and hymns indicates to the reader that Cora was a good mother. Cora commands a white audience of the nineteenth century to recognize the logic of the infanticide and their own beliefs within her tragic decision because she acts on a maternal love both divine and understandable.

The differences between the two infanticidal maternal characters, Cassy and Cora, highlight Stowe's construction of Cora firmly within the boundaries of "true womanhood." In *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Cassy's unstable femininity, as indicated by her erratic behavior, initially disturbs the recognition between the reader and her character. Cassy must undergo a Christian and domestic conversion to reestablish her ideal maternity before the reader "feels right" about her story. In *Dred*, Stowe immediately forges a sympathetic connection between Cora and the reader based on Cora's perfect reflection of republican motherhood throughout her narrative. With the mounting tension over the issue of slavery and outbreak of sectional violence over the Fugitive Slave Act in 1855 and 1856, Stowe demands that her readers immediately understand Cora as a "true woman" and therefore never question her moral authority to critique the slave institution.

The difference between the narratives of Cora and Cassy also suggests the possibility of Stowe's own conversion from a staunch belief in the absolute power of sympathy to a skepticism in the effectiveness of "feeling right." Whereas Cassy demonstrates the importance of personal spiritual conversion and learning to "feel

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[26] Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 275.

right," Stowe's representation of Cora highlights the need for urgent action that cannot wait for sympathetic feelings. In Edward's failure to understand Cora, Stowe presents an essential problem with a purely sympathetic reading of slave stories. In *Dred*, Stowe reveals a growing frustration with abolitionist tactics and the American legal system.

A brief history of Stowe's novels helps contextualize her transformation. Stowe famously ends *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with clear instructions for how the reader should react to her book. After recounting the epic tragedy of slavery in America, she concludes, "There is one thing the individual can do, —they can see to it that they feel right." She continues that the individual who feels right "is a constant benefactor to the human race."[27] Once the reader feels right—understanding slavery is immoral—the reader restores the human race and helps end slavery. In *Slavery on Trial*, DeLombard explains that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* firmly argued slavery was "a national sin that could be rectified through sympathy and prayer."[28]

In 1854, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote and published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*; her voluminous response to the proslavery critics who claimed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a fraudulent piece of antislavery propaganda between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred*. *A Key* reads as a horrific two hundred and sixty-page scrapbook, presenting a jumble of news articles, oral testimonies and legal disputes which Stowe claims were her inspiration for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. According to DeLombard, Stowe realized in *A Key*, through her extensive indictment of abolitionists' failures, that the heart of the problem lay in the American legal system and the inability of white

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[27] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 385.
[28] DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 169.

advocates to transform the tragedy of slave stories into actual reform. DeLombard continues that Stowe imbues *Dred* and especially the character of Edward Clayton with her ambivalence towards the judicial process and the ineffectual abolitionist. The novel concludes, however, with Edward learning to "feels right" for the slaves and care for them as his family. A mix of sentiment and legal critique, *Dred* reexamines the paternalism of the white sympathetic mediator without offering an alternative.[29]

While Stowe generates feelings of pity and admiration for Cassy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Cassy's uncertain femininity initially prevents a sympathetic recognition of the reader's own traits within the character. When a gambling addiction and debt forces Cassy's master to sell her children and eventually Cassy herself, the reader witnesses a tragic scene of motherhood. After seeing one of her children sold and ripped screaming from her arms, Cassy says, "Something in my head snapped."[30] The mental anguish that results from this experience governs Cassy's actions and her maternal character. Pain overwhelms Cassy's character. When Cassy tells Tom the tragic history that led up to her own act of infanticide, the modulations in her voice erratically rise and fall. At one point she bursts into a fit of bizarre laughter, sobs and convulsions. Unlike Cora, Cassy does not exhibit "perfect composure." While Cassy once reflected certain ideals of womanhood, her current hysterical nature distances her from the reader.

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[29] Ibid, 151-153.

[30] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Similar to Cora, Cassy nurses her master back to health and he calls her his "good angel." Two differences, however, remain which separate Cassy from the "true womanhood" as Cora exhibits. Cassy desires marriage but allows herself to live in sin because her master lies that God sanctions their union and more importantly her passions for him govern her choice. Cassy's acknowledgement of his handsome physique places her outside the boundaries of a pure woman as a "true women" due to her sexual desire. Also Cora's "redemptive womanhood" inspires her master to treat her as an "domestic angel" and marry her whereas Cassy remains distanced from the reader from her continued identity as a slave.

Ironically, the act of infanticide reconnects Cassy to a readership on the grounds of sympathy. Cassy commits her infanticide in a manner similar to Cora's murder by having her baby slip from sleep into death. Though the administration of laudanum is more aggressive than Cora's hyper sentimental and religious infanticide, Cassy still "gently" murders her child, who painlessly drifts into death unaware of his mother's deed. Also, despite her claims that "something in my head snapped," Cassy remains rational during the infanticide. She quietly holds her son, preventing him from waking and bestowing one last kiss on him. In the infanticide she reminds the reader of her strong maternal love, lamenting "O, how I loved him."[31] Cassy establishes her identity as a republican mother in her infanticide.

Reunited with her family in Canada, Cassy undergoes a spiritual conversion, her fury dissolving as she returns to Christianity and God. Most importantly, Cassy learns to be a mother again. Cassy's daughter Eliza acts as her mother's moral teacher: "Eliza's steady, consistent piety, regulated by the constant reading of the sacred word, made her a proper guide for the shattered and wearied mind of her mother."[32] Cassy's emotional conversion embodies Stowe's concluding argument. Once Cassy "feels right" by having her soul restored to God, she and her daughter together rebuild proper maternal bonds and reestablish the lost domestic sphere.[33] Eliza acts as a redemptive woman and even mother to Cassy, instilling Cassy with proper Christian teaching and morality. Cassy in turn mothers her granddaughter, who perfectly resembles the infant Eliza at the moment Cassy lost her. By learning to

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[31] Ibid., 318.
[32] Ibid., 373.
[33] Lori Askeland, "Remodeling the Model Home in Uncle Tom's Cabin and Beloved," *American Literature* 64, no. 4 (December 1992): 789-792.

"feel right" with Christian and maternal love, Cassy can reclaim her identity as if her time in slavery never passed. In doing so, she helps reestablish the perfect domestic sphere Americans aspire to in the nineteenth century. The seamless end for Cassy and her family can be read as argument in favor of Stowe's manifesto for the reader to "feel right."

From the first passage detailing Cora's rescue of the Stewart plantation, the reader should "feel right" about the heroine. Once on the witness stand, Cora actually condemns readers who refuse to understand her story. At the end of her testimony on the infanticide she calls to the court, "And, now, if any of you mothers in my place, wouldn't have done the same, you either don't know what slavery is, or you don't love your children as I have loved mine."[34] She divides the court and readers into two categories. The first category consists of those who understand the traits of "true women," but not the realities of slavery, which requires ideal mothers to kill their children. Cora condemns the second category of readers as ignorant to the ideals of the cult of domesticity, true maternal love and a mother's necessary sacrifice for her children. Stowe implies the reader should aspire for the first category, to live according to the ideals of "true womanhood," but thereby also immediately agree with Cora and understand her condemnation of slavery through infanticide.

The Fugitive Slave Act pushed the moral question of slavery into the hands of northerners and forced their active participation. Northerners had to decide to either uphold the institution by returning slaves or breach federal law by denying slave

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[34] Stowe, *Dred*, 440.

masters the right to claim humans as property.[35] Though Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* after the passage of the Act, the violence in the years following the novel questioned whether "feeling right" effectively addressed the problems the Act posed.[36] While Stowe insists the reader sympathize with her heroine through the mother's call to the court for understanding, Cora's fierce demand for recognition raises questions over what understanding her story entails.

Edward Clayton demonstrates Stowe's ambivalence to a purely sympathetic response to Cora's story. After hearing Cora's testimony, Edward Clayton leaves the courtroom with the conviction "to enlist for [Cora] the sympathy of some of his friends."[37] When Edward visits Cora with this offer, she rejects his sympathy, telling him there is little kind feelings can do alone. She continues to suggest that Edward use his "time, influence, or money to spare" to help other slaves. She tells him, "That's all I have to ask."[38] Cora retracts the concluding guidance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by suggesting that feeling right and prayer are not enough. Sympathy alone cannot help Cora and her still enslaved family; Cora pushes Edward to enact concrete changes.[39] Her reiteration that these small but tangible actions are all she asks casts doubt on the principles of good intentions. Edward must produce more than sympathy.

DeLombard argues that Stowe critiques Edward Clayton's reaction to Cora's testimony by showing that "the apparently well intentioned white mediator deprives

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[35] Personal Interview with Joan Hedrick, (12/04/2009).
[36] DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 156.
[37] Stowe, *Dred*, 442.
[38] Ibid.
[39] DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 168.

resistant black speech of its power by interpreting it as a plea for paternalistic protection and private sympathy."[40] Cora delivers a forceful testimony in which she confesses to murder, condemns the Fugitive Slave Act and accuses the American legal system for upholding the institution that destroys families. Edward digests her speech and responds with an ineffectual offer of sympathy. DeLombard contends that Stowe's persistent inability to imagine an alternative to the white paternalist advocate is demonstrated by Cora's call for understanding from the white court and Edward's eventual transportation of Cora's family to a community for former slaves in Canada, which he then oversees. [41] Edward's misreading of Cora's testimony, however, suggests a questioning of the extent to which feelings and sentiment protects enslaved persons. Tompkins argues that Stowe commands the reader to close *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "feeling right," which should then lead to action.[42] In *Dred*, Stowe goes farther, demanding Edward immediately provide action rather than mere sympathy.

DeLombard argues that *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a startlingly stark and brutal portrait of slavery without the sentiment found in Stowe's fiction, provides an explanation for the dissolution of her conviction that sentiment and prayer could change America's slave system. [43] In a story related in *A Key*, an enslaved man is chained to a tree for twelve hours while his master continuously whips him. When he finally cuts him down, he pours a solution of water and pepper over his wounds. The

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[40] Ibid., 172.
[41] Ibid., 151-176.
[42] Jane P Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
[43] DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 151-153.

man dies, the master goes to trial, and is acquitted.[44] Cora's insistence on Edward's "influence" suggests that tangible actions might be needed now to before waiting for the nation's change of heart.

III.

Introduction to Hattia M'Keehan and *Liberty or Death*

Little is known of the details of Hattia M'Keehan's life except what she offers in her autobiography, *The Life and Trials of a Hoosier Girl*. The thirty-page autobiography surprisingly does not offer insight into her sentiments about the antislavery movement even though her first piece of fiction, *Liberty or Death, or Heaven's Infraction of the Fugitive Slave Law*, was published six years before her autobiography and vehemently attacks slavery. In *Modern Medea*, Weisenburger offers a brief sketch of the writer. Hattia M'Keehan married a New Orleans slave owner who died in 1854, at which point she moved to Cincinnati and joined the growing abolitionist movement in Ohio. Weisenburger conveys that M'Keehan considered her husband "heartless," providing insight into her transformation from member of a slave owning family to an abolitionist.[45] In *The Life and Trials*, however, she barely mentions her husband, but in a few sentences insists that she mourns his death. She never mentions slavery but discusses her novella solely in terms of its great financial and popular success. Whether a sincere work or a ploy for monetary gains, her novella provides remarkable critiques on the slave institution

[44] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (Cleveland, Ohio: John P. Jewett & Co. 1853), 79-80.
[45] Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 271-272.

through a strong maternal heroine whose choice to murder her children exemplifies the ideals of liberty all Americans must understand and champion.[46]

In 1856, M'Keehan wrote *Liberty or Death*, a hundred-page novella following the Margaret Garner story. The entirety of the novella centers on the decision and commitment of infanticide by the protagonist, Gazella. Similar to Stowe in *Dred*, M'Keehan imposes on the reader the injustice of a slave system which denies an ideal mother the freedom to enact her maternal love and necessitates her murder of her children. Unlike Stowe, M'Keehan does not veil the infanticide but rather writes a graphic scene for the reader. M'Keehan also links Gazella's maternal love to a nationalist rhetoric in order to maintain a site of connection for the reader through the infanticide. By setting up Gazella as a mother literally sanctioned by the founding fathers in her pursuit of freedom for her children, Gazella's infanticide develops into a fantastically imagined space in which M'Keehan conflates the role of a male revolutionary and a republican mother together.

Liberty or Death begins by presenting Gazella as a "true woman." She repeats Scripture by heart and desires above all else to bring her children to freedom so that they may live moral lives. Her crude and unchristian mistress, Mrs. Nero, won't let Gazella teach her children how to read the Bible and never reprimands her son's perverse teasing of Gazella's daughter, hinting at sexual exploitation in the future. A weak man and somewhat ambivalent towards the institution of slavery, Mr. Nero makes a few futile attempts to protect Gazella from his vicious wife. Gazella decides to set her children free or sacrifice their lives, resolving "Liberty or Death." She

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[46] Hattia M'Keehan, *The life and trials of a Hoosier girl* (Printed for the authoress, 1863), 10-11.

escapes across the Ohio River only to be followed by a band of ruffian slave catchers. She finally slays her children, and, after a short trial, is ordered to return to her masters by a corrupt official. Unbeknownst to Mr. Nero, Mrs. Nero sells Gazella to a plantation in New Orleans. The novella ends with Gazella's future uncertain, although her death is implied.

A Mother's Revolution: Masculine and Feminine Rhetoric in *Liberty or Death*

From the onset the reader understands the ties drawn between the infanticidal enslaved mother's story and America's national history. The title, *Liberty or Death*, directly recalls Patrick Henry's famous Revolutionary War dictum. Ensuring the connection for the reader, M'Keehan repeats the quote verbatim on the title page, "Give me Liberty, or give me Death" and cites the American hero.[47] By framing the entire story in nationalist rhetoric before the plot begins, M'Keehan asks the reader to remember the country's history: that the founding fathers valued liberty as the highest ideal and fought to obtain freedom. In the novella, the reader cannot escape this command. Every characteristic and action of the heroine evokes this nationalist ultimatum. In the Preface, M'Keehan informs the reader that she draws her story from the facts found in the newspaper accounts of the recent and famous case of Margaret Garner.[48] The reader's knowledge of the infanticide coupled with the title, presents an obvious opening to the story, demanding that the reader interpret the plot with an understanding of the national honor linked with death.

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[47]Hattia M'Keehan, *Liberty or Death*, (Cincinnati, Ohio, Printed for the authoress, 1856), I.
[48] M'Keehan, *Liberty or Death,* iii.

In *The Trials of Anthony Burns,* Von Frank outlines the tactics employed to harness the heroism associated with a love of higher law and national history in abolitionist texts on fugitive slaves. Von Frank argues, "If heroism may be supposed to occur when an individual's love of justice exceeds his fear of unrighteous punishment, then heroism may be manufactured" specifically by "bolstering that love or, equally, by allaying that fear."[49] The only words directly attributed to the historical Margaret Garner exist in the few factual statements from her testimony as recounted by the (unreliable) newspapers. While maternal love and a love of liberty could naturally be linked to Margaret's story, the abolitionists add their own interpretations of her emotions. While both Stowe and M'Keehan present portraits of heightened maternal love and desire for freedom, M'Keehan's representation of a slave comes across as more "manufactured." In *Dred*, Stowe includes a vignette in which Cora's brother, Harry, corresponds with Edward Clayton over the trans-historical nature of the founding father's fight and love for freedom and a slave's search for emancipation. Harry openly argues that the fight of slaves is more fraught and painful than the American revolutionaries' feelings of oppression from taxes of from the tyrannical British government.[50] After Cora's testimony, Edward concedes to Harry's distinctions. M'Keehan never addresses the difference between Patrick Henry's sentiment surrounding the Revolution and Gazella's drive to keep her children safe from rape and sale.

M'Keehan also avoids the obvious problem of the historical allusion that Gazella chooses "Liberty or Death" for her children rather than for herself. While

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[49] Albert J Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 105.
[50] Stowe, *Dred*, 435-437, 442-443.

nineteenth century society placed children's souls in the hands of mothers, M'Keehan's use of the allusion still feels uncomfortable and an ill fit for the infanticide. There is an immediate tension between writing her heroine in terms of heroic motherhood and a narrative of a male revolutionary. M'Keehan, however, handles Gazella's motherhood and nationalism with an intense drive for connection that refuses to allow a reading of Gazella as less than the ultimate mother and a citizen. M'Keehan builds sites for connection that relentlessly demand sympathy from the reader, but also read as manufactured to the point of complete fantasy.

In conjunction with the masculine rhetoric, M'Keehan immediately domesticates the title by opening the novella in the home. The beginning of the first chapter places Gazella in a familiar domestic scene, sitting in front of a fire on a cold night and watching over her four children in the bed next to her. Gazella emulates the ideals of the cult of domesticity at its most fundamental level: a mother protecting her home and children from the elements. The slave system, however, immediately perverts Gazella's domestic space: "Gazella, the slave mother, in moody silence sat by the dying embers that still faintly glimmered on her homely hearth—yet not hers but her master's."[51] The break at the end of the sentence signifies the master's role in disrupting normal domestic life. M'Keehan explains Gazella sits alone because her master sold her husband to the Deep South. The hearth should belong to Gazella but her master owns her home. M'Keehan attaches domesticity to Gazella's need for freedom. Liberty for Gazella means gaining control of the hearth "not yet hers."

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[51] M'Keehan, *Liberty or Death*, 9.

Along with establishing the basic trope of Gazella as an "angel of the hearth." M'Keehan also stresses the extraordinary nature of Gazella. Similar to Stowe, M'Keehan endows Gazella with the ideals of a "true woman" in order to demonstrate the hypocrisy of enslaving such an ideal mother. Though Gazella never gains a marriage coupled with wealth and status like Cora, M'Keehan stresses Gazella's resemblance to a white middle class woman. Gazella's name exoticizes her but also ties her to western romantic images. M'Keehan also literally "whitens" Gazella claiming, "in her veins ran but a tincture of African blood."[52] Especially when compared to Mrs. Nero who dismisses reading the Bible, Gazella comes closer to realizing the ideals of motherhood in antebellum American than her mistress. Mrs. Nero speaks coarsely, "thumps" the slaves on the head and becomes annoyed by Gazella's "natural" pride. Worse, Mrs. Nero raises a "petted, peevish, spoiled child," weak in ethics and stature.[53] The ideal characteristics attached to Gazella along with her angelic children heighten the tragic quality of her situation and insist upon the unnaturalness of preventing a woman such as Gazella from controlling the home while allowing Mrs. Nero to command her domestic sphere.

Gazella's maternal heroism comes to fruition in her contemplation of freedom for her family. After contemplating the horrors of slavery for herself and her children, Gazella passionately imagines her family walking on "freedom's soil." M'Keehan heightens Gazella's love for liberty into a heroic feat capable of freeing her enslaved maternal identity:

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[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 17-23.

> As on freedom she thought, her expanding heart beat high in her breast, kindling with the fires that blaze on liberty's altar. Then was the unresisting, trembling slave in a moment, transformed to an intrepid, dauntless heroine![54]

M'Keehan writes Gazella's feelings and thoughts as transformative, literally changing her into a heroine. Before considering liberty, Gazella stood a submissive woman enslaved, possessing the qualities which constitute an ideal slave for a slave master. Her internal desires, however, oppose her weakened state, mentally and physically changing her presence. Gazella's heart beats "higher" suggesting that her heart beats stronger, racing and pumping blood faster at each liberating thought. The "higher" beat also alludes to the higher status she gains from her love: the identity of a free woman and a heroine. As Von Frank describes the "manufacturing" of heroism, M'Keehan intensifies Gazella's love of liberty. Now "intrepid" and "dauntless," Gazella's change suggests that she will take up her task without fear. Nationalism, similar to Cora's blood, rises from Gazella's core, fueling her identity with "liberty's" flames.

Though Gazella's empowering thoughts free her, her desire for freedom stems solely from her need to fulfill her maternal responsibilities. Imagining her family in freedom frames her interior monologue and Gazella's resolve to commit infanticide to give her children freedom follows her thoughts. M'Keehan reinforces this conflation of motherhood and masculine revolution, writing, "her woman's heart" resolves on a "purpose that would by no means have been unworthy a Roman senator, nor dishonor to a Washington, or a Jefferson."[55] M'Keehan clearly draws the lines

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[54] Ibid.,10.
[55] Ibid.

between the male fighters and her maternal instinct. M'Keehan's portrait of Gazella as encouraged by the country's founders recalls the paths of the Revolutionary War. Yet the masculine history also solidifies her desires as feminine since she finds this decision from her heart; her heart "beats high" and the American heroes confirm her heart's resolution to infanticide.

Similar to the tension in the title, however, M'Keehan's rendition of the infanticide unsuccessfully melds the two histories together. When Gazella actually commits the murder, the images separate, presenting a violent path to freedom and maternal protection of her children as simultaneous but not necessarily coexistent. Immediately preceding the moment of infanticide, Gazella gazes on her daughter, Rosetta, and considers how

> Slavery dooms the female held in its iron clutches. That thought determines the deed—the glittering steel is raised—a moment tis trembling suspended in the air, while the frenzied eye of the mother marks the blue vein upon the tender neck of the lovely Rosetta, where the fatal stroke she aims –like the lightning's flash the murderous knife descends.[56]

Gazella's sense of maternal duty spurs her on to commit infanticide. M'Keehan explicitly asks the reader to sympathize with a mother who can only protect her daughter's sexual purity, essential to own maturation into a "true woman" and an ideal mother, through death. M'Keehan, however, attempts to detach the image of Gazella as a mother from an image of her as a violent enactor of "Liberty or Death." M'Keehan writes the first image of the knife in the passive tense, separating the weapon from the direct action of Gazella. The blade then absorbs the violent images

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[56]Ibid.,. 60.

from Gazella. Gazella's role appears mechanical and submissive to the weapon as the "knife descends" almost of its own accord.

While Stowe dissolves the violence into Christian love, M'Keehan allows the scene to surface. In doing so, M'Keehan cannot quite resolve the tension between the violence of her story and the maternal care. The ruptured connection in the scene of the infanticide highlights the abolitionists' need to fictionalize the story through literary tactics which veil the realities of Margaret Garner's story. Reinhardt argues that the "authorizing conventions" abolitionists employed to write the infanticide often "bumped against the uncomfortable facts of the case."[57] M'Keehan condenses two distinct conventions to create a stable site of recognition for the reader, which inevitably "bump" against the facts of the story. Almost afraid extra pages would allow the inconsistencies to develop, M'Keehan condenses her plot into a novella. Simultaneously concerned the reader might separate the image of the revolutionary from the maternal characteristics of her heroine, M'Keehan condenses both images into one long title, *Liberty or Death, or Heaven's infraction of the Fugitive Slave Law*. In the title, M'Keehan frames Gazella's decision as a choice made by the nationally revered founders and as a divine intervention. A mother and a revolutionary, M'Keehan's Gazella encapsulates ideals the American reader treasures gaining a sympathetic understanding of the infanticide.

IV.

"Taking Refuge from the Hard and Terrible"

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[57] Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?," 96.

Stowe begins *A Key To Uncle Tom's Cabin* by warning the reader:

> "In fictitious writing, it is possible to find refuge from the hard and the terrible by inventing scenes and characters of a more pleasing nature. No such resource is open in a work of fact; and the subject of this work is one on which the truth, if told at all, must needs be very dreadful."[58]

Though Harriet Beecher Stowe and Hattia M'Keehan preface their fictitious works as based in the "facts" of Margaret Garner's story. The facts collected within the newspapers point to another story, one ultimately more "dreadful." The newspapers relate Margaret's children as much fairer in complexion than herself and her husband, Robert Garner. In *Modern Medea*, Steven Weisenburger writes that within the family tree of Archibald Garner, a pattern emerges between Margaret's pregnancies and those of Archibald's wife. Weisenburger explains that while pregnant, mistresses often delegated their sexual responsibilities to enslaved women. During these "gander months," slave masters frequently used enslaved women for sexual satisfaction. [59] In nineteenth century America, this story of Margaret's abuse would not inspire sympathy but most likely disrupt the reader's belief in the humanity of enslaved character.

Though Stowe and M'Keehan ignore such abuses and engage in racist literary tactics in order to create sympathetic connections and support for the abolitionist movement, the authors still push acceptable social boundaries, especially surrounding womanhood, with their retold stories of Margaret Garner. In wrapping their heroines in the popular ideologies of white culture to compensate for the extreme violence of

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[58] Stowe. *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. III.
[59] Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 47-48.

the infanticide, Stowe and M'Keehan force their readers to imagine their mothers as "true women" who also actively defy the patriarchal institution of slavery. In *Home Fronts*, Lora Romero writes that sentimental literature represents the reality that "some discourses could be oppositional without being out right liberating."[60] While the process of inclusion occurs in imagination of the author and reader, such sentimental literature possessed radical moments for the era.

In my next Chapter on Toni Morrison, I discuss how *Beloved* exposes the failures of the sentimentalized fantasies of motherhood produced in these texts. I will not focus solely on how Morrison exposes the "dreadful" aspects of slavery as silenced in antebellum sentimental texts—since Morrison does not write only a "dreadful" story—but rather I explore the ways in which Morrison addresses the process of sympathy. Particularly, I study how Morrison rewrites and critiques the nineteenth century construction of slave stories into what Stowe calls a more "pleasing nature," a fictional "refuge from the hard and the terrible" where sympathy can function.

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[60] Romero, *Home Fronts*, 4.

CHAPTER THREE

RECOGNIZING THE DIFFERENCES: REVISING CONNECTIONS OF SYMPATHY

Toni Morrison's Engagement with the Tradition of Sentimental Literature in Beloved

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I.

Introduction

> There would be no lobby into this house and there would be no introduction into it or into the novel. I wanted the reader kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book's population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense.
>
> —Toni Morrison
> Foreword to *Beloved*

> In *Beloved*, Morrison only asks her readers tally up the sins committed against the darker people and feel sorry for them, not experience the horrors of slavery as they do….Had she the kind of passion necessary to liberate her work from the failure of feeling that is sentimentality, there is much she could achieve.
>
> —Stanley Crouch
> "Aunt Medea"

In 1974, while working on *The Black Book*, an anthology of African American experiences during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Toni Morrison uncovered

"two or three little fragments of stories" written on Margaret Garner from 1856.[1] Within these "fragments," Morrison found a mother's "willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom" and a story she could not shake for over ten years.[2] Published in 1987, Morrison's 300-page novel, *Beloved,* earned a Pulitzer in 1988 and contributed to her Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, making Morrison the first African American author to receive the award.[3] As a black female novelist writing over a century after the abolitionist literature and the termination of slavery, Toni Morrison must write a different kind of novel than her predecessors. Important continuities, however, exist. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which *Beloved* revises the nineteenth century slave narrative with sensitivity to the portraits of Margaret Garner I discuss in Chapters One and Two.

Stanley Crouch's infamous condemnation of *Beloved* as a novel that incites meretricious sentimentality from readers provides an interesting entrance into the discussion on Toni Morrison since he misreads both *Beloved* and sentimental literature. Though Crouch mistakes Morrison's desire to incite an emotional reaction as a call for pity from the reader, the terms of his criticism highlight the complexity of Morrison's engagement with the trope of sympathy. But first, a look at how Crouch misreads sentimentalism helps reveal Morrison's revisions of the literary tradition. In sentimental literature, authors use the process of sympathy to evoke more than mere pity for their characters. As I argue in the First and Second Chapters, "feeling right"

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[1]Elizabeth Kastor, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved* Country: The Writer and Her Haunting Tale of Slavery," Ed. Barbara H. Solomon, *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), 57-58.

[2] Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1987), XVII.

[3] Nellie Y. McKay, "Introduction," ed. Nellie Y McKay and William L. Andrews, *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-18.

in sentimental literature requires the reader to recognize himself or herself in the suffering character. The trope of sympathy—at least by the standards of the nineteenth century— thereby dictates that by "feeling right," the reader experiences the "horrors of slavery as [slaves] do," an achievement Crouch claims sentimentality cannot attain.[4] This model of sentimental reading created the space for Charles Stowe to make the claim, absurd to modern readers, that he could feel the whip of a slave master when reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*[5]

Charles Stowe presents an extreme reading of sentimentalism, but one accurate to the intentions of nineteenth century authors and common to antebellum readers. Glenn Hendler in *Public Sentiments* argues that sentimental literature surrounding slavery insists that a bridge can be built between the reader and the suffering slave character if such a bridge was constructed from shared feelings. Self-recognition in sentimental literature, therefore, depends on an entrenched belief that individuals who undergo extremely different experiences are "emotionally equivalent."[6] The literary history on Margaret Garner offers insight into how these textual connections operate. In *Dred* and *Liberty or Death*, Stowe and M'Keehan impart the infanticide as "understandable" because their heroines who commit the deed, Cora and Gazella, act according to the ideals of "true womanhood and motherhood" as revered by white American society of the time. Maternal love especially functions as a site to familiarize the reader with the experience of slavery and the choice of infanticide.

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[4] Stanley Crouch, "Aunt Medea," ed. Solomon, *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*, 67.
[5] Hendler and ebrary, Inc, *Public Sentiments Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 9.
[6] Ibid., 6.

The texts of Stowe and M'Keehan reveal how, in order to incite sympathy in the reader, the slave characters must possess maternal love and exhibit motherhood to an idealized standard aspired to by free white women. Hendler explains, "The politics of sympathy is fatally flawed by its drive to turn all differences into equivalences."[7] The difference of the experience of slavery cannot fundamentally separate the character from the reader and therefore slavery cannot affect the interiors of the fictional enslaved mothers. Abolitionist writers insist on relentless maternal love in their fiction in order to combat the proslavery argument against the humanity of enslaved persons, but in doing so the abolitionists construct fantasies in which their enslaved characters remain psychologically detached from the system which holds them.

In *Beloved*, Morrison powerfully demonstrates that the ideal of motherhood upon which the operation of sympathy depends in nineteenth century texts is fundamentally unsustainable under slavery. Slavery undermines maternal love through the dehumanizing tactics of the slave master, including separation, commodification and sexual violation. In the multiple stories of motherhood, Morrison rejects the emergence of a didactic message on motherhood, especially surrounding Sethe's decision to kill her children. In doing so, Toni Morrison never asks the reader to "tally up the sins committed against the darker people and feel sorry for them" as Crouch claims.[8] Morrison blocks such a simple reading of pity by allowing other former enslaved characters to voice their condemnation of Sethe. Morrison, therefore, re-enacts neither the feelings of pity Crouch attaches to

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[7] Ibid., 20.
[8] Stanley Crouch, "Aunt Medea," ed. Solomon, *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*, 67.

sentimentality nor feelings of emotional equivalency abolitionists link to sentimental literature. Instead, Morrison offers a much complex engagement with sentimentalism which demonstrates that sympathy among the characters fails in the absence of a single model of motherhood.

Beloved revises rather than discards the process of eliciting sympathy in sentimental literature. The characters must realize a type of connection which, instead of operating on equivalences, allows each character to recognize their story as distinct. The characters accept as valid the uniqueness of their own experiences and reactions while also granting the same validity to others. Community enters as a new alternative site through which the former enslaved characters can rebuild a sense of belonging, mutual care and common humanity, but only when the characters acknowledge each other's stories. At the conclusion of the novel, the former enslaved mother, Ella, offers a model for reading Sethe's infanticide when she recognizes her story and Sethe's story as separate experiences connected in a larger narrative of slavery.

Instead of employing familiar tropes to enable the reader to identify with her characters, Morrison allows differences and disconnections to develop. In this way, she paradoxically creates a "shared experience" between the text and the readers as she identifies in her Foreword to the novel. Particularly on the issue of motherhood, the reader fails to find a stable site to recognize as familiar. Instead Morrison forces the reader into an "alien environment" and "snatch[es] the reader from one place to another," from one confusing interior to another, without "preparation" or traditional

sentimental devices.[9] Within these unfamiliar fragments, the reader must build the text by deciphering the textual disturbances and disconnections between the characters. Though a vast gulf of history and experience separates the reader from the characters, the reader connects and sympathizes with the characters by recognizing the horrors of slavery as a collective past and part of the reader's national and literary heritage.

II.

Introduction to Toni Morrison and *Beloved*

Since writing her first novel, *The Bluest Eye,* in 1970, Toni Morrison has come to be seen as one of the most accomplished writers of her era. Reaching an immense audience on a national and global scale, *Beloved* remains Morrison's mostly widely read and taught novel.[10] *Beloved* represents an ambitious undertaking by Morrison to revise Americans' internalization of the nation's horrific and too often neglected history of slavery. Throughout the text, Morrison scatters "bits and pieces of documentary realism" to create a portrait of slavery which feels unnervingly true and immediate for the reader. Nellie Y. McKay writes, "[*Beloved*] was a conscious act toward healing a painful wound: a studied memorial to great social wrongs of the enslavement of Africans."[11] Morrison's "act of healing" arrives in the form of her novel which confronts the complete lack of national acknowledgement of the hard histories slavery entails through her intimate and difficult stories. Morrison writes,

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[9] Morrison, *Beloved*, xvii.
[10] McKay, *Toni Morrison's Beloved*.
[11] Giulia Scarpa, "Narrative Possibilities at Play in Toni Morrison's Beloved," *MELUS* 17, no. 4 (Winter, - Winter, 1992 1991): 90.

"There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves….And because such a place does not exist (that I know of) the novel had to."[12]

Beloved begins in 1873, eight years after the end of the Civil War and eighteen years after Sethe kills her daughter with a handsaw. On the outskirts of Cincinnati in a house haunted by the ghost of the murdered baby, Sethe and Denver live in solitude, ostracized by the African American community until Paul D arrives. A former slave with Sethe on the plantation Sweet Home, Paul D drives away the "spiteful" infant ghost from 124. In its place comes Beloved, a young woman whom Denver and Sethe come to perceive as the reincarnation of the buried infant. Believing they are reunited, Beloved and Sethe engage in a deeply destructive relationship of pained love. Greedily feeding off Sethe's affection, Beloved grows while Sethe withers away. In desperation, Denver leaves 124 in search of help. A communal exorcism led by the former slave Ella finally releases Beloved's detrimental hold on Sethe. Weaving in and out of past and present, the atrocities the characters endured under slavery and within their precarious emancipation slowly emerge throughout the novel in fragments. Especially in the face of Beloved, the characters find themselves turning inward, confronting the past to survive the present.

III.

Alienating Identities: Enslaved Womanhood and Motherhood

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[12] Toni Morrison, "A Bench by the Road," Carolyn C Denard, ed., *Toni Morrison: Conversations* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 44.

The newspapers and sentimental literature from the nineteenth century offer an image of Margaret Garner as a heroic mother who refuses to relinquish her maternal responsibilities and love for her children even when faced with impending capture. In Cora's testimony on the witness stand and the chapters leading up to Gazella's murder, the women defend their infanticides to the reader by presenting their maternal love upon which they base their decision as the ideal. Cora's painless murder with "prayer" exhibits a Christian love that not only protects her children's bodies from violation but their souls from moral corruption. Gazella desires freedom for her children which would make America's founding fathers, George Washington, Patrick Henry, proud to call her a mother. They are republican mothers. They are mothers who unequivocally represent the ideal of motherhood to white Americans of the antebellum era.

Framing her story as one of ideal motherhood creates a powerful site for sympathetic connection between white readers and the fictional enslaved characters. In "Mother's Love, the Construction of an Emotion in Nineteenth Century America," Jan Lewis argues, Americans believed both nature and God implanted in all mothers' "hearts a love that was pure and holy."[13] The race and the economic status of an enslaved person gave way to the connecting force of universal motherhood. In the most often cited example of cross racial connection, Harriet Beecher Stowe's slave character, Eliza Harris, turns to the white senator's wife, Mrs. Bird, and asks her, "Have you ever lost a child?"[14] Eliza's question causes Mrs. Bird to burst into tears, remembering her own dead child. As Glenn Hendler explains, Mrs. Bird, like the

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[13] Jan Lewis, "Mother's Love, the Construction of an Emotion in Nineteenth-Century America," *Mothers & Motherhood*, 53.
[14] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

reader, realizes in this moment feelings surrounding the love and loss of a child as "emotionally equivalent" between enslaved black mothers and free white readers.[15] The Margaret Garner characters of Stowe and M'Keehan operate on the same principles of sympathy. Though the infanticide separates the white readers from the fictional characters, the maternal love invites the reader to equate their experience with Cora and Gazella.

Sympathetic literature, therefore, offers a fantasy of the ability to transcend immense differences in experience through a belief in the power of shared emotions. Though later in her career Harriet Beecher Stowe begins to question the capabilities of "feeling right," sentimental texts typically use the transformative power of good intentions to gloss over the realities of dehumanizing violence; feeling for the suffering character fulfills the duty of the reader. In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant argues that underlying sentimental literature, "a kind of soft supremacy rooted in compassion and coercive identification wants to dissolve all that structure through the work of feeling right."[16] For Berlant, the dissolved structure is the reality of a society which denies citizenship and humanity to groups of people, by passing laws that reduce them to property and commodifying them on the auction block. Feeling right and compassion come at the cost of the recognizing the hard realities which fundamentally separate individuals.

To acknowledge the potential destruction of the maternal feelings due to the experiences endured under slavery would compromise the sites of self-recognition

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[15] Hendler and ebrary, Inc, *Public Sentiments Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 6.
[16] Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 6.

between the fictional mothers and the readers in antebellum America. Berlant argues that sentimental literature functions on plots of feminine feeling that locate "the ideality of femininity in fantasies of unconflicted subjectivity."[17] The forces of slavery could threaten to physically break the bonds between a mother and her child, but never her emotional bonds, her maternal love. Cora and Gazella demonstrate these traits as the mothers remain "true women" during the infanticide. Cora kills her children with Christian love. Though a bloodier tale, Gazella reminds the reader she kills her children with their eternal souls and freedom in mind as she cries "Liberty, heaven, and immortality are thine!" when she stabs her son.[18] Maternal love not only stabilizes the violence but also the characters themselves.

In the nineteenth century literature on Margaret Garner, Stowe and M'Keehan insist upon the "unconflicted subjectivity" of their heroines to preserve the fantasy that enslaved women can be locked within slavery but somehow detached from its effects. Though the slave institution bases its profits on the bodies of women, Cassy, Cora and Gazella command a type of sexual purity within the boundaries of the cult of womanhood while under slavery. Gazella and Cora both marry the fathers of their children and Cassy, who possesses the most violated body, lives with the father of her children as man and wife.[19] The choice of infanticide by the women also represents a

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[17] Ibid., 35.
[18] M'Keehan, *Internet Archive*, 60.
[19] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 315.
Cassy actually has children with two different men. She, however, exhibits a variation of a pure "motherhood" because she lives with both men—both her white slave masters at distinct points in her life—as man and wife. Though Stowe suggests that Legree holds Cassy for his sexual pleaser, Stowe never directly describes rape and Cassy never becomes pregnant from him. She never produces children with Legree and the text leaves space to assume that they never have sex. Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
The origin of Baby Suggs arises from one of the original "fragments" that Morrison read and Stowe and M'Keehan include analogous mother in-law characters in their works. These women in *Dred* and

kind of "purity" or "unconflicted subjectivity." The women cannot compromise their responsibilities as republican mothers and through infanticide the mothers fulfill their maternal duties by protecting their children's souls. Their acts of violence reflect expressions of uncompromised maternal love in the face of slavery.

In order to connect antebellum American readers—readers who often questioned the humanity of enslaved persons—to their characters, abolitionist writers ignored hard truths about the physiological and psychological effects of a system which systematically dehumanizes those living under it. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison engages with the nineteenth century slave narratives by undermining the fantasy of sympathy used to connect black and white mothers on the basis of shared maternal love. Through her varied portraits of motherhood as her individual characters experience it, Morrison combats both the destructive prejudice that mothers could never love their children under slavery and the detrimental stereotype of the "super heroic black woman" who could endure every trial subjected by her slave master and emerge unscathed in maternal love.[20] The stories of Sethe, Baby Suggs and Ella expose motherhood under slavery as destructive and never universal for the characters.

Within her characters' searches to claim legitimacy as women and especially mothers, Morrison exposes a much more fraught process of self-identification as a human. In "The Bonds of Love and The Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Barbara Schapiro argues, "[*Beloved*] reveals how the condition of

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Liberty or Death are minor characters as well as both constructed from the stereotyped "Mammy" slave characters. Both women describe how they continue to desperately love their children though they have lost them to the system of slavery.

[20] Lucille P Fultz, *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 68.

enslavement in the external world, particularly the denial of one's status as a human subject, has deep repercussions in the individual's internal world."[21] Despite resistance to the dehumanizing tactics of the slave master through infanticide or the exchange of sex for the protection for their children, the external abuse of slavery penetrates the mother's interiors. By carefully delineating the lifetimes of abuse suffered by Baby Suggs and Ella, Morrison helps the reader understand how a mother might have children she "could not and would not" love.[22] Such stories frame Sethe's motherhood, forcing the reader to critically consider her choice to commit infanticide. The novel suggests the act must be understood both in its logic and its horror as bound up in the system of slavery.

The ambiguous portrayal of Sethe stands as a major divergence from the abolitionists' texts on Margaret Garner. While Sethe recalls the female purity of sentimental literature both in her sexual purity and uncompromised maternal love, Morrison in no way repeats the fantasy of "unconflicted subjectivity" as Berlant identifies. Barbara Schapiro argues, "[*Beloved*] wrestles with this central problem of recognizing and claiming one's own subjectivity, and it shows how this cannot be achieved independently of the social environment."[23] At times, Sethe defiantly ignores the realities around her by claiming complete control over herself and her children despite the blatant threat of her master's ownership of her family. Morrison never condemns Sethe's efforts. In framing her story by those of Baby Suggs and Ella, however, Morrison shows the reader that Sethe's subjectivity cannot exist

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[21] Barbara Schapiro, "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's "Beloved"," *Contemporary Literature* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 194.
[22] Morrison, *Beloved*, 28.
[23] Schapiro, "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's "Beloved"," 194.

wholly detached from slavery and that such claims are destructively fragile. In her fierce insistence on her claim as a mother, the reader sees Sethe's internalization of slavery in her consideration of her children as her things, "her best thing," the things she fiercely wants to protect, but also possess.[24]

In the community, the reader sees the beginning of an alternative site through which former enslaved individuals can rebuild a sense belonging based on their own stories rather than false aspirational ideals. After Sethe joins the community, the reader realizes that residual consequences of slavery still linger in the characters' refusal to recognize Sethe's motherhood or confront their own past maternal stories. Sympathy fails as the community holds onto a need for equivalences to understand each other's stories. Glenn Hendler explains: "If I have to *be* like you and *feel* like you in order for you to feel for me, sympathy reaches its limits at the moment you are reminded that I am not quite like you."[25] If the abolitionists utilized motherhood in order to connect their Margaret Garner characters to their audiences, Toni Morrison shows that maternal love can also function as an obstacle to interpersonal connection.

To clarify, I argue Morrison identifies a problem in how sympathy operated in the nineteenth century, in texts such as the Margaret Garner story. By showing how sympathy can fail even in a community of former slave mothers all of whom shared horrific stories of life under slavery, Morrison reveals the psychological harmful and socially alienating consequences of the ideals espoused in abolitionist literature. None of the women had the luxury of living according to the ideals prompted by the cult of womanhood in antebellum America. Therefore, they need a connection which

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[24] Morrison, *Beloved*, 321.

[25] Hendler and ebrary, Inc, *Public Sentiments Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 8.

recognizes hard realities instead of the fantasies of emotional connections based on a universal motherhood.

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The reader witnesses the consequences of the cruel conditions in which Baby Suggs experiences motherhood after a lifetime of abuse under slavery. Instead of stabilizing a notion of maternal love under slavery, the difficult portrait of Baby Suggs's relationship with her children, whom she simultaneously cherishes and rejects, allows multiple perspectives on maternity to exist in the text.

> Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for *hearing* that her two girls neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her—only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. That child she could not love and the rest she would not.[26]

The passage begins and ends with love, revealing the ways in which maternal love changes for Baby Suggs due to her experiences during slavery. Morrison repeatedly exposes the dangerous fragility of Baby Suggs's connection to human beings. Her children in particular disappear quickly and without warning. Her detached loss of her children contrasts with the painful but intimate separations experienced by enslaved mother characters in the nineteenth century texts. Cora prays with her children as they

[26] Toni Morrison. *Beloved.* 28.

die, Gazella stabs her children and even Cassy, whose master sells her children without her knowledge, finds her son again in the streets of New Orleans. She endures one last goodbye as her son holds onto her skirts and cries before being dragged away. Baby Suggs *hears* about the loss of her daughters, without the chance to "wave goodbye" and never reunites with any of her children.

Amidst the fleeting connections between Baby Suggs and her children, a truly difficult rhetoric emerges which demonstrates the impact of the dehumanizing tactics on her interior and maternal love. Morrison uncomfortably imposes upon the reader an awareness of the master's commodification of her children. Individuals "got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized." In *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Cassy's children are also victims of the corrupt slave economy, sold off to pay the master's gambling debt. However, they still retain individuality. They have names—Eliza and Henry—physical descriptions—Henry was the image of his father—and personality traits—Little Eliza was timid.[27] In *Beloved,* the reader does not learn much more about Baby Suggs's children—except for Halle—than the image of "checker pieces." By encasing her characters within the language of the slave master, Morrison stresses the inability of the reader to recognize their experiences within Baby Suggs's motherhood.

The contrast between Baby Suggs's relationship to her children and the nineteenth century slave heroines illuminates the nature of the abolitionists' destructive fantasies; the intensified strength of the enslaved mother character comes at the cost of acknowledging hard realities. In their efforts to insist upon their

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[27] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 315-318.

heroines' uncompromised motherhood, the abolitionists also deny their characters individualized defiance. Morrison reveals both powerful resistances and painful failures of motherhood in Baby Suggs. After four months of exchanging sex for protection for her children, Baby Suggs sees her son traded for lumber in the spring. In addition to losing the bargaining "game," Baby Suggs unintentionally furthers the system of slavery by producing another child from the "coupling." Baby Suggs now has children she "could not" and "would not" love: children produced by rape and children she cannot protect. While the reader never questions Baby Suggs's humanity, Morrison offers an uncomfortable portrait of the degree to which slavery absorbs her into the system and affects her psyche. With Baby Suggs, Morrison also undermines the nineteenth century belief in an idealized maternal love which can prevail against all obstacles.

The character of Ella further destabilizes the notion of universal motherhood with her own personal transformation of maternal love. Like Baby Suggs, Ella endures a long history of sexual violation. For over a year, Ella's slave master and his son keep her locked in a room, continuously raping her. After helping Sethe across the Ohio River, Ella looks over the infant Denver strapped to her belly and tells Sethe, "If anybody was to ask me I'd say, Don't love nothing."[28] Ella's rape not only causes her to have a child she "could not" or "would not" love, but, as I will explore later, a child she kills.

Against this backdrop of difficult representations of motherhood, the peculiarity of Sethe's self-conception becomes visible. Initially, Sethe appears to have

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[28] Morrison, *Beloved,* 108.

more in common with nineteenth century representations of Margaret Garner than she does with Ella or Baby Suggs. Sethe appears to belong to the cult of womanhood that Cora and Gazella embody when she chooses Halle as her husband and he fathers her four children. Morrison, however, does not construct Sethe's narrative in the fantasy framework the abolitionists employ for sympathy; Sethe's experiences do not reveal her subjectivity as wholly detached from the mentally and physically destructive effects of slavery. Sethe's ability to fit, however minimally, into the terms of womanhood and motherhood proves just as destructive as the utter degradation of Baby Suggs. In a cruel irony, Sethe's attempts to preserve her "true womanhood and motherhood" in a system which denies her that identity produce new physiological and psychological crises.

Unsure of how to legitimize a marriage, Sethe naively turns to Mrs. Garner, the only other woman on the plantation, for understanding and feminine advice.[29] Instead of the anticipated sympathy, Sethe experiences verbal abuse as degrading as physical cruelty. In the women's conversation, Morrison demonstrates how sympathy fails between free white women and enslaved black women despite the familiar sites of recognition. When Sethe tells Mrs. Garner she plans to marry Halle, Mrs. Garner replies:

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[29] In terms of sentimental literature from the nineteenth century, the fact that Mrs. Garner owns slaves would not fundamentally negate her ability to "feel right." In *Dred,* the white heroine, Nina Gordon, inherits the slave plantation. Since she cares for her slaves as a "domestic angel," remaining on the plantation after a pox epidemic, she "feels right," loving and praying for her slaves. Stowe condemns the slave institution by showing the vulnerability of slaves in the hands of a bad master, Nina's brother, Tom Gordon, after Nina dies, but the text does not necessarily suggest the slaves' futures would be compromised under Nina's care. Mrs. Garner's response that Halle will make a good husband recalls the familial care Nina provides and almost suggests a connection based on feminine feeling between Mrs. Garner and Sethe. Mrs. Garner offers a verbal agreement to Sethe's marriage and in doing so conveys "good intentions" towards Sethe.

> 'So I heard.' She smiled. 'He talked to Mr. Garner about it. Are you already expecting?'
> 'No ma'am'
> Well you will be. You know that, don't you?'
> 'Yes, ma'am.'
> 'Halle's nice, Sethe. He'll be good to you.'
> 'But I mean we want to get married.'
> 'You just said so. And I said all right.
> 'Is there a wedding?'
> Mrs. Garner put down her cooking spoon. Laughing, a little, she touched Sethe on the head, saying, 'You are one sweet child.' And then no more.[30]

Sethe asks Mrs. Garner to support her promise of a stable relationship with tangible support: a marriage. Mrs. Garner, however, clearly does not recognize Sethe's womanhood as a serious claim. In the abolitionist texts, the heroine's purity, often exemplified by marriage, provides a presumed site of identification for the white readership into the experience of the enslaved characters. Through the marriage of Cora and Gazella, readers were supposed to recognize these ideal women's rightful place within the cult of womanhood and champion their efforts to solidify their domestic spheres. Even though Mrs. Garner should recognize herself in Sethe's position, she clearly does not as demonstrated by her cruel and easy dismissal of Sethe's quest for a wedding.

Morrison does not argue Sethe needs to be recognized within the boundaries of the cult of womanhood. Rather, Mrs. Garner's regard of Sethe illustrates Berlant's theory that sentimental literature "cultivates fantasies of vague belonging" through a generality of emotion. "Feeling right" attempts to substitute the need to extend actual citizenship and transform legal systems of oppressions.[31] Mrs. Garner substitutes

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[30] Morrison, *Beloved*, 31.
[31] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 5.

effective actions for a smile and vague verbal agreement about Halle. A marriage almost certainly would not prevent the schoolteacher's nephews' rape of Sethe, but Mrs. Garner's failure to take Sethe's claim to womanhood seriously confirms that Mrs. Garner "feels" for Sethe but does not protect her. In place of protection, when Sethe tells Mrs. Garner about her rape, her mistress's sympathetic tears directly produce the incomprehensible whipping of Sethe when pregnant: "I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. The boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open my back."[32] Considered the universal language of sympathy in the nineteenth century, tears bring about Sethe's whipping from the schoolteacher's nephews which place a chokeberry tree on her back that seeps white flowers and bleeds red roots.

While Mrs. Garner does not draw the tree on Sethe's back, she withholds Sethe a consideration of humanity. Mrs. Garner's conversation with Sethe over marriage reveals how she regards Sethe more as property than a woman with shared experiences. Mrs. Garner reminds Sethe she needs to be expecting soon, conflating words of an almost womanly advice with an expectation of coercive childbearing that was basis for the economics of slavery. The motives of the slave institution underlie Mrs. Garner's "affection," exposing her as an unreliable and destructive association for Sethe's understanding of her womanhood.

Instead of reading the warning signs of the impending denial of her womanhood and humanity under slavery, Sethe uses Mrs. Garner as a model for her own self-construction. Sethe aligns her need for knowledge with her mistress's story

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[32] Morrison, *Beloved*, 20.

of a wedding: "I never saw a wedding, but I saw Mrs. Garner's wedding gown in the press, and heard her go on about what it was like. Two pounds of currants in the cake."[33] Though Sethe understands that she cannot have a wedding with luxurious food on the plantation, she still draws her information about marriage and weddings from Mrs. Garner as shown in her desires for a meal with the Sweet Home men and "a little sweet william in my hair."[34] While Morrison does not condemn Sethe's search for a legitimate and celebrated union, Sethe's attempts to construct a stable relationship from these small events or objects borrowed from her mistress's history foreshadows the fragility of her marriage.

Sethe's patchwork dress intensifies the reader's awareness of the vulnerability of her claims to womanhood under slavery. Unable to make a full dress of her own, she must collect used bits of cloth: "I took to stealing fabric and wound up with a dress you wouldn't believe. The top was made from two pillowcases in her mending basket. The front of the skirt was a dresser scarf a candle fell on and burnt a hole in." Even though she makes the dress from discarded fragments, Sethe still cannot claim these bits as her own: "Now the back was a problem for the longest time. Seem like I couldn't find a thing that wouldn't be missed right away. Because I had to take it apart afterwards and put all the pieces back where they were."[35] Sethe wraps herself in her external environment; the cloth of her mistress that she herself cannot own. Yet, Sethe fiercely holds onto a belief that she commands complete control over herself: her body, her marriage, and her children under slavery. Sethe's bizarre dress

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[33] Morrison, *Beloved,* 71.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

and willful denial of her circumstances convey the complex mechanism through which slavery affects her internally and externally. Her dress never covers her back, foreshadowing her vulnerability and specifically the tearing of her flesh under the whip of the schoolteacher's nephews. Slavery forces Sethe to construct her wedding in this horrifically limited fashion, but her construction of the dress demonstrates Sethe's complicated engagement in the process which inevitably tears apart. By building a dress (and a marriage) out of discarded remnants of the slave system, Sethe at once defies that system and assures her own destruction.

Morrison never judges Sethe's fierce claims to her marriage or her children but shows the consequence of her unequivocal faith in an ability to exist completely detached from her external environment. She refuses to acknowledge the slave master's possession of her children, but in her claim uses a language which uncomfortably reminds the reader of a slave master's claims. When the schoolteacher arrives to recapture Sethe and her children, Sethe kills her daughter and attempts to murder her sons and newly born Denver. Sethe "collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful."[36] When Sethe collects "bits" for her dress the pieces never belonged to her. In contrast, Sethe claims her children wholly as her own and uses everything in her power to keep them from the schoolteacher's inhumane treatment. Even though her children constitute the "best things" about herself, she perceives her children as thing, bits, ultimately objectifying their bodies through her possessive love. When Sethe believes the dead baby returns,

[36] Morrison, *Beloved*, 192.

she zealously repeats "Beloved, she my daughter, she mine."[37] Sethe's claiming of her children as "mine"—which Beloved then destructively claims of Sethe as well—reflects a relationship of possession. In "Giving Body to the Word," Jean Wyatt argues that Sethe's use of "mine" recalls "what the slave owners said, and as in the larger social order, the disregard of the other as subject, the appropriation of the other to one's own desires, leads to violence."[38] When Sethe makes her own objectified claim to her children, she disregards their claims to life and disturbing questions arise surrounding her defense of violence.

In refusing to relinquish her children and her right to maternal love, Sethe's choice of infanticide presents both the strongest analogue to the nineteenth century literature and the most significant divergence from the sentimental literature. In *Playing with Difference*, Lucille Fultz argues, "Sethe's narrative is "a plea for a mother's right to love her own—an insistence upon the natural law of maternal love."[39] Fultz's statement oversimplifies Morrison's view of motherhood in *Beloved.* Like Cora and Gazella, Sethe fiercely claims her right to love and protect her children. Unlike the nineteenth century authors, Morrison undermines the notion of a natural law of motherhood under slavery. Sale, rape and commodification of both mothers and children deny women their natural roles as mothers. Indeed, Sethe openly admits her lack of knowledge of maternal skills. When Sethe first joins Baby Suggs in Ohio, a wealth of unknown maternal information opens to her from her mother-in-law. An understanding of when to stop breast feeding comes as wholly

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[37] Ibid., 236.
[38] Jean Wyatt, "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,"* ed. Solomon, *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*, 222.
[39] Fultz, *Playing with Difference*, 65-67.

new revelation to Sethe who is amazed that the baby she sent ahead is "crawling already" with the solid food Baby Suggs gives her.[40] For Sethe, motherhood needs to develop socially rather than naturally because isolation from any truly sympathetic women at Sweet Home had thwarted her maternal development. The unnaturalness of Sethe's situation manifests itself in the language she uses in regard to her children as "things" and her obsession to possess them.

Before the infanticide, the community presents itself as means for healing Sethe from the brutality of Sweet Home. Baby Suggs and Ella reinvest their strength and love into the community. The reader witnesses their strong affection for others by witnessing in their healing of the fugitive Sethe. Ella gives Sethe shoes for her dead feet and takes her to Baby Suggs. Once at 124, Baby Suggs restores Sethe. In one of the most touching and powerful scenes, Baby Suggs carefully washes and cures the shattered parts of Sethe's body. Baby Suggs literally cares for Sethe's womanhood and motherhood by using sheets to wrap the womb that was torn from giving birth to Denver while escaping across the Ohio River.

The women's powerful sympathy as seen in their direct attention and care dissolves in the face of Sethe's claim to motherhood asserted by her act of infanticide. When town marshals come to take Sethe to jail, members of the black community arrive. The community first reacts with sympathy as they witness and vicariously connect their own sufferings at the hands of slave masters to Sethe's recapture. When Sethe denies the community a common site of suffering, an image of herself affected by her experience, the community pulls away from Sethe's alienating pride. Sethe's

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[40] Morrison, *Beloved*, 187.

head is too high, her back too straight, and the ferocity of her claim as manifested in her appearance prevents the community from singing for her.[41] Ella particularly reacts against Sethe: "She understood Sethe's rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected."[42] Here, Morrison shows precisely the "failure of feeling that is sentimentality," and thus critiques that which Crouch accuses Morrison of writing within her text. The characters do not pity Sethe but rather turn against her for her own actions, the infanticide, rather than the abuse of the slave master. When the characters cannot find a familiar connection even under the "same" experience of slavery, sympathy fails.

III.

Finding a Community within *Beloved*: Sympathetic Connection Between the Characters

Sympathy fails when connection depends on emotional equivalence, as community's initial reaction to Sethe shows. Each of Morrison's three central enslaved mothers—and the larger community they represent—has a painful story of motherhood whose uniqueness prevents the creation of a common site of emotion where the women can identify with one another's suffering. In *Beloved*, however, the characters must connect despite their individual experiences under slavery in order to find healing.

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[41] Ibid., 179.
[42] Morrison, *Beloved*, 302.

The connection between the other former enslaved members of the community and Sethe must allow for the distinct experiences to simultaneously exist while also bonding the individuals. In "Daughters Signifyin(g) History," Ashraf Rushdy argues the characters must recognize Sethe's act "within a framework larger than that of individual resolve" and develop an "understanding that the forces of slavery compelled her to do what she did."[43] By seeing Sethe's resolve to kill her children as an effort to protect them from slavery, an institution they understand and know from their own rapes, whippings and losses, the members of the community recognize their own place and Sethe's place within a collective narrative. Despite the personal horrors and emotional reactions deployed to survive their abuse, the external environment of slavery still stands as the common factor from which the characters can build new meanings of connection. The characters, especially Ella, must remember their own story along with Sethe's as "compelled by the forces of slavery" in order to engage with the process of communal healing through memory.

Remembering the past stands as a formidable feat in *Beloved* which requires immense strength on the part of the characters. Rushdy continues that the characters' involvement in the storytelling of the infanticide requires an undertaking "of extreme pain and stress, of the effort to remember what each desires to forget."[44] The characters must confront the stories they desire to forget in order to realize their connection to Sethe's infanticide, to recognize their decisions and experiences as compelled by the hand of the slave institution too. Part of the "pain and stress" of the

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[43]Ashraf Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g) History," ed Andrews and McKay, *Toni Morrison's Beloved*, 51.
[44] Ibid., 55.

memory includes an understanding of the complexity of their memories and their own involvement in their experiences under slavery.

Rushdy, however, insists that *Beloved* is not a story centered solely on the realization of collective pain and specifically critiques Crouch for labeling the novel as such. Rushdy counters, "The novel both remembers the victimization of the ex-slaves who are its protagonists and asserts the healing and wholeness that the protagonists carry with them in their communal lives."[45] Though Baby Suggs lost all her children including Halle, she nurtures Sethe's family and other fugitive families back to health after their escapes at 124. When Sethe arrives, Ella wraps Denver's navel with a strip of cloth and reassures Sethe that her children are at 124. The characters possess the ability to heal but Sethe's decision forces the community to remember their most repressed and painful memories, to recognize how slavery precisely forced a change to their psyche. Only after returning to the memories they most desire to forget, can the characters recover individual and communal strength.

The need for the community's involvement becomes desperately apparent when the mysterious Beloved, who Sethe and Denver believe is the murdered baby reincarnated, returns. Relentlessly demanding Sethe's love while also endlessly condemning Sethe's maternal choice of infanticide, Beloved drain's Sethe's life energy. When Denver seeks help by bringing the story to the community of women, Ella fully listens for the first time rather than dismissing Sethe. She instead recognizes Sethe's story within the narrative of slavery, in doing so she also remembers her own

[45] Ibid., 45.

past and place in the community's collective history. By remembering her infanticide, Ella finds strength in the present.

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In Ella's reaction to Sethe's story as translated to her by Denver, the text moves from the failure of sympathy which depends on equivalence to Morrison's revised notion of sympathy which allows for distinction. Before hearing the story of the baby ghost Beloved, Ella reacted to former stories of "a killing, a kidnap, a rape" under slavery by comparing them to her own and finding that her experience of the "lowest yet" surpassed theirs in horror.[46] Ella's comparison recalls the nineteenth century process of sympathy which depends on analogues. While the text never creates a hierarchy of experiences under slavery and rather shows them as undeniably distinct, Ella detrimentally dismisses other characters' stories as unequal to her experience.

When Ella finally hears about the returned Beloved, Ella begins her typical response of comparison only to be stopped by a new personal element of the story: "It infuriated her and gave her another opportunity to measure what could very well be the devil himself against the 'lowest yet.' There was also something very personal in her fury. Whatever Sethe had done, Ella did not like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present."[47] Her "personal fury" halts the comparison and compels her to consider another force besides the "lowest yet" in the situation. For the rest of the passage, Ella focuses on the community's shared danger of the past of slavery

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[46] Morrison, *Beloved*, 301.
[47] Ibid., 302.

returning to the present and in doing so, considers both Sethe's current situation and her own past as co-existing yet distinct within the common framework of slavery the community shares.

Ella never accepts Sethe's decision to kill her children, continuing to see Sethe's murder as a prideful and a mistaken expression of maternal love. Ella, however, does not need to reconcile her own perspective of motherhood with Sethe's choice. "Whatever Sethe had done," Ella decides does not warrant the return of the ghost in the flesh. On the day of the infanticide, Ella recalls that she understands Sethe's "rage" but not her reaction. Years later, Ella recognizes that she, Sethe and the entire community are plagued by the past of slavery. A shared desire to protect the present from the past horrors compels Ella to act.

Ella inevitably confronts her own past of "the lowest yet" when she arrives at 124 to help free Sethe from her most painful memory of killing Beloved. Ella's insightful reading of Sethe's story triggers her intimate and painful connection with her own repressed memory:

> Was it true the dead daughter come back? Or a pretend? Was it whipping Sethe? Ella had been beaten every way but down. She had remembered the bottom teeth she had lost to the brake and the scars from the belt were thick as a rope. She had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by the 'the lowest yet.' It lived five days never making a sound. The idea of that pup coming back to whip her set her jaw working, and then Ella hollered.[48]

After investing Sethe's situation with her "personal fury" at the past returned, Ella demonstrates a sincere concern for Sethe's story and wonders whether the past truly

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[48] Ibid., 305.

can return to reawake pain. These hard questions lead Ella to consider her buried memories. The past perfect tense (she "had remembered"), suggests that Ella once remembered the past but does not anymore. After actually considering Sethe's story, Ella journeys back to her memory and then the event itself.

While the reader never witnesses Ella feelings of guilt, the text strongly suggests Ella never verbalized her infanticide to anyone in the community and therefore avoided remembering her part in "the lowest yet." Ella's confrontation of the past demonstrates a complex emotional reaction impossible to fully penetrate by the reader. When Ella imagines her baby returning, she screams. Whether a scream of rage at the slave master's abuse returning through her child or a cry of repressed anguish for her decision to murder her child, or both, Ella gives voice to the past in the present.

After Ella hollers, she brings the "sound" from herself and from the community of women who voice the "sound" as well.[49] Morrison never explicitly defines the "sound." Possibly a communal return to their pain under slavery or a return to a community before slavery, the "sound" connects the women, to each other and to Sethe. Ella reveals how she and the other women carry the "wholeness" with them out of slavery and into their communal beings. The reader witnesses the characters' strengths, not only in their ability to survive but also their capacity to remember their unique stories, both the experience and its affect on their innermost lives.

IV.

[49] Ibid.

Finding a Community Outside *Beloved*: Connecting the Reader

A conclusion to *Beloved* after the release of the "sound," however, would undo Morrison's revision of the sentimental literature. In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant argues, "In a sense, the sentimental bargain has constantly involved substituting for representations of pain and violence representations of sublime self-overcoming."[50] In such sentimental literature, the heroines' triumph over the incredible pain, remaining completely unaffected by the experience endured. Even Cora and Gazella, who die after the infanticides, reflect this argument. In antebellum literature, scholars present death as the highest achievement for any sentimental heroine regardless of race.[51] Having fulfilled their duties as republican mothers, these heroines reside in heaven, externally uncorrupted by the immorality of slavery. Berlant argues that the danger in such sentimental literature is that the reader "displaces the solution" from social change to achieving a fantasized shared emotion. By fantasizing shared emotion of suffering, the reader can imagine the feelings of triumph as the plot reaches its resolution, thereby the reader leaves behind the victim and the system which created the suffering for the character upon closing the book. [52]

By demonstrating the inability of her slave mothers to share the same perspective, Morrison denies the reader an entrance into the emotions of characters. She also rejects a clear resolution to the novel for the reader to easily understand. Though the community brings the "sound," Sethe feels pained at the loss of Beloved.

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[50] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 65.
[51] Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 127.
[52] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 33-67.

Though Paul D, another former Sweet Home man, assures Sethe she can be her "best thing," she wonders if her pieces, her body and her interior will still hold together.[53] Through these disconnections, the reader connects to the text. In "Call and Response as Critical Method," Maggie Sale argues that the multiple perspectives voiced in *Beloved* especially surrounding Sethe's infanticide, force readers to decipher the many stories but ultimately find their own distinct responses. Sale argues, "*Beloved* presents and clarifies social problems without resolving them, and so raises or calls out, issues to be discussed or to be responded to by readers in the community."[54] The unresolved questions and stories force the reader to engage on a personal level with the text to find meaning in the story.

Morrison's revision of the tradition of sentimental literature in terms of the readers' connection to the text, plays out in her conclusion or call to the reader. At the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe delivers a didactic message for the reader to "feel right" by supporting the abolitionist cause. Morrison dramatically challenges the reader to engage with unresolved problems in the final pages of the novel without any direction from the author.

> Down by the stream in the back of 124 her footprints
> come and go, come and go. They are so familiar.
> Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will
> fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though
> nobody ever walked there.[55]

In this passage exists both an exposure of the failure of sympathy and the possibility of its revision with a dynamic relationship which engages the reader with the

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[53] Morrison, *Beloved*, 321-322.
[54] Maggie Sale, "Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Traditions and Beloved," *African American Review* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 44.
[55] Morrison, *Beloved*, 324.

unresolved questions of *Beloved*. Read one way, the text suggests that any reader can step into the footprint, absorb the imprint as his or her own. Thus the passage alludes to the process of sympathy that the sentimental authors of the nineteenth century impressed upon their readers. The fictional renderings of Margaret Garner as found in the newspapers and texts of Stowe and M'Keehan molded the enslaved mother's story to fit their ideals of white womanhood and motherhood in order in order to win the sympathy of white readers. The passage also holds the critique of such sympathy in the disappearance of the footprints. As Berlant argues, when the reader easily imagines enacting the suffering of the character, the reader can also easily leave the suffering character when the plot resolves and the character triumphs over adversity. If "feeling right" is the goal, there is a temptation to leave behind the characters once the reader achieves that goal.

In contrast to the "sites of familiarity" as constructed in the nineteenth century texts, the passage presents a revision of sympathy in the disturbances in the text. The reader cannot arrive an assured understanding of the meaning of the passage and must engage with the text based on his or her distinct emotional response. The reader possesses a footprint and a story unique to the wearer. The reader must develop the text in relation to individual interpretation. Even then, Morrison's openings into the text refuse any one story or interpretation from dominating. While Sethe and Beloved clearly engage in a destructive relationship with one another, the reader feels uneasy in Beloved's expulsion by the community. Beloved, the victim of both her mother and the slave system which compelled her mother to murder, becomes victimized again by the community's rejection of the past. Similar to Ella's hard-won acceptance

of her story's relationship to Sethe's, the reader acknowledges both obvious differences from the characters and his or her own place in the larger narrative of history.

The reader understands that Beloved, although driven from the community, considered by the members as "disremembered and accounted for" cannot fully disappear.[56] The footprints will continue to "come and go" even when the reader attempts to leave them behind. In the response to the text from a community of readers, the healing process and an improved sympathy begins. Beloved represents a larger narrative that the characters in the novel and the novel's readers of any race can connect to: a shared past in which the atrocities of slavery and the possibility of healing co-exist.

[56] Ibid.

Epilogue

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> It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we [you, the reader, and I, the author] come together to make this book, to feel this experience.
>
> —Toni Morrison

Rereading *Beloved* for the first time since high school, I thought I had picked up the wrong book. I remembered the shed scene and the characters' stories, but I did not remember any of the varied entrances into Sethe's decision. I thought Morrison wholly supported her heroine's decision. After finishing this project, I do not think my reading of *Beloved* in high school was entirely wrong—I do not think it was right either. After first reading the text, I closed the book utterly unnerved not only by Sethe's infanticide, but by Sethe's tree, her milking, Paul D's forced oral sex, Baby Suggs's straw boss, Ella's broken teeth. Even with that naiveté—which I wouldn't want back—, I didn't feel the pity as Crouch decides the text demands. I just couldn't understand. I couldn't wholly understand the stories. But to me Sethe was right and I thought any mother who loved her children would do the same.

On rereading, I realized that, by oversimplifying Morrison's complicated assessment of her heroine, I had overlooked one of the characters' greatest strength. Though the abuse still reads as intolerable, Sethe and the other maternal characters' gain a strength in the present that grows from their ability to confront that past. While

Morrison never allows the reader to fully enter the emotions of her characters, she draws a remarkable connection between the pain of the characters' remembering and the country's own refusal to remember history. Thereby, she connects the individual and collective in their avoidance of hard histories.

Harriet Beecher Stowe admitted in 1853, Americans take "refuge from the hard and the terrible" in fiction.[1] We must admit, however, this same fiction boldly confronted the atrocity of slavery at that present time, calling the reader to do the same. Morrison recognizes these two sides and engages with the "force and inadequacy" of the nineteenth century slave narratives and our own modern narratives.[2] Like the calls in *Dred* and *Liberty or Death* to realize the dire need for readers to consider the institution which forces a mother's decision to protect her children through death, *Beloved* loudly calls to the reader to connect to the present by acknowledging the past's place in it, though we can never fully comprehend that history. Since we, the readers, are not enslaved individuals nor in any way able to imagine ourselves in that positions, our tasks become building the "spaces" of the novel by remembering our own place in history—our need to read the stories we don't know.[3]

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[1] Stowe, A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin, I.
[2] Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, xiii.
[3]Claudia Tate, "Toni Morrison," *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 125.

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