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Motherhood, the Right to Choose and Toni Morrison's Mothers

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Abstract

In June 2022 the US Supreme Court terminated women's constitutional right to abortion. The courts reaffirmed the pronatalism that has come to define and circumscribe women's lives and choices. The paper begins with examining how the 'mother' is not created merely through the biological act of birthing, but more through the discourses of patriarchy, race, law and class. It cannot bode well when the courts and a culture privilege fetal rights over women's rights. However, even as one condemns the attack on the US women's reproductive autonomy, one needs to concede that there can be no real discussion of a woman's right to abort without a concomitant discussion of a woman's right to mother. Both are after all reproductive choices that should be available to all women at all times. The paper attempts to examine how reproductive rights in the US have often been contingent on the skin tone of the birth giver. Black women in the US have historically and routinely been denied reproductive rights. They have been compelled to birth or been refused mothering rights when they birthed out of choice. The paper examines how the US electorate, including white women, has permitted politicians of various hues to link welfare with black women's reproductive choices and how even the withdrawal of the right to abort will impact black women more than white women. In this context, the paper examines select texts of Toni Morrison which offer a veritable archive of the reproductive rights denied to black women. Her novels remind us how black mothering has always been performed under tremendous strain and scrutiny as US moved from slavery to neo slavery.

Keywords:
Abortion, Morrison, mother, Moynihan, welfare.

The ideal mother has no interests of her own.

Alice Balint, "Love for the Mother and Mother-Love."

She was my best thing.

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Christine bathed and went back to bed. She had always been unsentimental about abortions, considering them as one less link in the holding chain, and she did not want to be a mother- ever.

Toni Morrison, *Love*

Motherhood constitutes a Copernican change in a woman's life, with the locus of meaning and investment splitting (if not shifting completely) between the self and the other. Yet it continues to be a compulsory milestone in most women's lives. Even today elementary science warns young girls of cervical complications if they dare bypass motherhood, much like the 19th century science which announced that "[I]f women went to college, their uteruses would shrivel up as their brains developed" (Snitow 301). Reproductive technology will not rest till one has tried one more drug or one more invasive procedure to fulfil one's 'biological destiny' and 'moral responsibility'. Despite all the ambivalence of the actual mothering experience, pronatalism continues to define our chronotope.

In June 2022 the US Supreme Court terminated the constitutional right to abortion- a right that US women had held for almost half a century now. As one looks on in horror at the attack on women's reproductive autonomy, the paper offers to examine how motherhood has been understood and performed, more specifically in the US. The first part of the paper examines how the 'mother' is often constructed not through the biological act of birthing, but through the sociological discourses of patriarchy, race, law and class. Here I refer to the theorisation of the maternal from the multiple foci of feminism, psychology, sociology and critical race studies. The section also discusses how motherhood was never available to or experienced by white and black American women identically. The second part of the paper examines how Toni Morrison's fiction offers a maternal subjectivity that is embedded in and confronts the interstices of race and community. It examines how in her works, motherhood is an experience that is never presumed to be simple or natural. The paper believes

Morrison's novels constitute an archive of the reproductive and mothering rights denied to black women. In Morrison's works, we see black mothers birthing, aborting, caring, loving, killing, and doing whatever it takes to mother in a racist society. The concluding part of the paper examines how the terrain of motherhood has shaped the cultural and political imaginary of America. It examines how in American politics, the skin tone of the birth giver has configured the right to abort and the right to mother. The paper believes that there can be no real discussion of the right to abort, without a concomitant discussion of the right to mother. Although the overturning of *Roe* v. *Wade* wrongfully deprives all women of their reproductive choices, the paper argues that it impacts black women in ways that it does not impact the white women.

Toni Morrison, the African American writer, offers a more dialectical understanding of motherhood than has been popularly available. Her novels show a consistent engagement with the theme of motherhood. Mothering is constituted differently in each of her fictional work- enslaved mother (Sethe, *Beloved*), nominally free mother (Mrs. MacTeer, *The Bluest Eye*), blood mother (many mothers in many of Morrison's texts), othermother (Ondine, *Tar Baby;* Alice, *Jazz),* exhausted mother (nearly all the mothers in Morrison's maternal universe), women who suffer from 'mother-hunger'(Violet, *Jazz),* indifferent mother (Sweetness, *God Help the Child*), mother who kills her child to protect it (Eva, *Sula*; Sethe, *Beloved),* mother who will kill to protect her child (Sethe, *Beloved*), mother who chooses to abort (Christine, *Love*), joyful mother (Sorrow, *A Mercy*), desiring mother (Hannah, *Sula*), racially proud mother (Baby Suggs, *Beloved;* Pilate*, Song of Solomon*), racially embarrassed mother (Mrs.Breedlove, Geraldine, *The Bluest Eye*)), abandoned mother (a two parent family is a rarity in Morrison's fiction), mother on welfare (Mrs. Bains, *Song of Solomon*; Sweetness, *God Help the Child*), mother who maims herself to avail of insurance to look after her children (Eva, *Sula*) mother who does not want to mother (Ajax's mother, *Sula*). The catalogue is long and weaves through protagonist mothers and minor character mothers.

Maternal theory has emphasised that gestation and parturition are only two of the many aspects of motherhood. The "loss of agency is most acute *after* the birth of a

child" (Chandler 535). It questions if mothering was always this anxious and punishing. Were the child's needs always this self-evident or has 'childhood' been invented as a preface to a particular kind of devoted motherhood? By the 18th century the upper and middle class European women found themselves tied to a private motherhood of "increased personal status, if decreased social power" (Hirsh 249). Having domesticated the women, the fathers could enjoy the "privilege of parenthood" without being ensnared by its cares (Ruddick 108).The mother is never the owner of the private space, but merely its gatekeeper and its upkeep-er. The mother, on most occasions, internalizes and naturalizes the unequal power distribution and consents to her own devaluation. The child, right from its infancy, is keenly attuned to the dynamics of familial power which are also repeated and reaffirmed in public and professional spaces. Adrienne Rich has stressed the difficulty, but also the need, to break this "collective isolation" of mothers by shattering the silence that envelops motherhood.

One of the very few white mothers in Morrison's novels, Margaret in *Tar Baby* sticks pins in her infant's behind and burns him with cigarettes. She is unable to explain this to herself and even less so to her husband when confronted many years later. He is "devastated knowing that she [Margaret] had never been drunk. . . . Anything was better than knowing that a pretty (and pretty nice) sober young woman had loved the bloodying of her own baby" (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 231). However Morrison extends a Rich like feminist understanding when she attempts to explain Margaret's behaviour:

> She was outraged by that infant's needfulness. . . . She could not describe her loathing of its prodigious appetite for security- the criminal arrogance of an infant's conviction that while he slept, someone is there; that when he wakes, someone is there; that when he is hungry, food will somehow magically be provided. (236)

The black mammy to the child also observes insightfully, "She didn't stick pins in her baby. She stuck em in his baby. Her baby she loved. . . . He kept her stupid; kept her idle. That always spells danger" (279).

Psychoanalytical theories have relentlessly shamed and blamed mothers to the extent that, "motherhood has become a psychological police state" (Douglas and Michaels 621). The mother is forever being faulted for either being too distant (read: indifferent, neglectful) or being too protective (read: castrating, devouring). Nancy Chodorow makes a plea for care-giving arrangement to be shared equitably between the father and the mother so as to socialize the child into a healthier independence and to avoid the 'omnipotence' that mothers get unfairly accused of. Psychoanalytic theory fails to address the mother as a subject in her own right and reduces her to an object to be abjected at a proper stage in the child's development. Miriam Hirsch points out accurately that "so long as the figure of the mother is excluded from theory, *psychoanalytical feminism* cannot become a *feminist psychoanalysis*" (Hirsh 247).

Such is the 'world historical defeat of women' that no mother, irrespective of her class, is spared the incarceration that comes with the institution of motherhood. Margaret in *Tar Baby* is married to a wealthy landowner. Her needs are well taken care of. Despite this, motherhood emerges as a stifling experience for her. While feminism has spoken eloquently, and rightly so, about the "self-cauterization" (Rich 22) that mothers are expected to put themselves through, how much more deadening must the struggle of the working class mothers be. They have to navigate a whole arsenal of bourgeois discourses which regulate, or rather berate, their mothering. The mind-body hierarchy, a cornerstone of liberal politics, negates the labour of the mother's body in favour of the father's mental-intellectual work. The sheer physicality of gestation, birthing and daily care-giving is reduced to the "'menial' work of body maintenance" (Rothman 397). The working class mothers are doubly hit by the proletariat-sation of their work. That mothering is an emotional-physical- intellectual labour is denied to all women and more so to the working class ones. Moreover, in reproducing the next line of assembly workers, the working class mothers also find themselves producing the social relations that sustain their exploitation in the first place. Working class feminists have often charged bourgeois feminists of being complicit in the political economy that makes their mothering doubly oppressive.

It is important to note here that feminism itself has struggled to define its relationship with motherhood. While Shulamith Firestone, Beauvoir and Millett have decried it as a disabling experience, Rich, Cixous and Kristeva have tried to recuperate its radical potential. Lesbian feminists have disagreed as to whether lesbian mothering constitutes 'accommodation' (Nancy D Polikoff) of hetero normative ideologies or if it harbours a 'resistance' (Baba Copper) to the same. Feminists have also disagreed on how motherhood should be evaluated politically- as a woman's superpower or as the greatest source of her vulnerability.

One of the biggest challenges to white bourgeois feminism has emerged from feminists of colour, who have successfully deconstructed the hierarchical binary between male-female, mind-body, nature-culture, reason-emotion, private-public, and labour-love. Slavery and subsequent discriminatory legislations in America made it impossible for the black women to own a safe, private domestic in which to bring up their children. In text after text, Morrison crafts with seething anger and sorrow women who birth but are not permitted to mother. She captures the loneliness of the children born to these mothers: "I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks- that's the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was" (Morrison, *Beloved* 72). Or the other enslaved child Lina, born to a native American mother, in *A Mercy*, who has been told that, "God hated idleness most of all, so staring off into space to weep for a mother or a playmate was to court damnation" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 45). Even more agonized and poignant is Morison's portrayal of the mothers of such children. *Beloved* mentions "a witless coloredwoman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies" (78).

Unlike white mothering, being away from the children out of coercion or economic necessity was always a component of black mothering. Patricia Hill Collins discovers a far more dynamic and layered pattern of mothering in African American families than is to be found in white homes. She points out the importance of "working for physical survival of children and community, the dialectical nature of power and

powerlessness in structuring mothering patterns, and the significance of self-definition in constructing individual and collective racial identity" (Collins 314). Collins coins the term 'motherwork' to soften the binary of private and public- an important cornerstone of white feminist writings on motherhood. Maternal isolation so rued by white feminists, is replaced by the threat of maternal separation from one's children in black writings**.** For whatever little togetherness is allowed to black families, bell hooks believes, the mother's and grandmother's efforts to engender spiritual autonomy and self love in the children humanizes the maternal labour compared to the alienating work that black mothers have to perforce perform outside the home (hooks 145).

Morrison's mothers can be placed against a whole spectrum of writings on motherhood. More importantly they can be situated against the backdrop of American politics as it has wound its way through slavery to racism, from slave master's ownership of the black child to the neoliberal pathologising of black mother's sexuality. It is worth noting here that "regulating Black woman's reproductive decisions has been a central aspect of racial oppression in America" and also that "the control of Black women's reproduction has shaped the meaning of reproductive liberty in America" (Roberts, "Killing the Black Body" 484). The debate regarding reproductive freedom has come to hinge on 'a woman's' choice to abort. It also needs to acknowledge the black woman's right to reproduce and mother in the first place. As American courts renege on the right to abort, one must recollect that American women's right to birth or abort or mother was always linked to their skin tone on the colour spectrum.

Even as white feminists waged their battle for better control over their reproductive choices, Native Americans mothers were frequently separated from their children. These children were kept in state run boarding schools to be forcibly assimilated in the European dream of an American future. Recent expose of brutalities, assault and exploitation of these children at the hands of functionaries entrusted with their care is deeply disturbing. It reminds one that in the US, 'childhood' and 'motherhood' as terms come into play only when European blood is under consideration.

The Moynihan Report of 1965 demonised the hard earned strength and the mothering practices of black women. The stoic sinew of the black mother, that had helped her survive state sponsored child-larceny, husband absenteeism, and degrading poverty, was blamed for the degeneration of the black man and the black community. Eva Peace, a woman abandoned by her husband in Morrison's *Sula,* pours kerosene over her son, Plum, and burns him to death because she recognizes that his drug addiction has made him incapable of surviving the cruel world of poverty and white racism. Rather than watch him die piecemeal, Eva's 'tough love' makes a choice that would horrify genteel conceptions of maternal love. The able bodied Eva is also shown returning as an amputee after an eighteen months disappearance with a "new black pocketbook"- a reference possibly to the redeeming of an insurance policy. The loss of one leg is what sees her and her children through the abject poverty heaped on the blacks in post slavery America. Eva's refusal to be broken either by white racism or by the husband's desertion is what constitutes true womanist mettle. However it is exactly this strength and emotional muscle that the Moynihan Report bemoaned. The Report's express agenda was the establishing of a stable Negro family structure to facilitate a "peaceful assimilation of the races in the United States" (Moynihan 1). Even as it acknowledged the racial violence suffered by the black men (and not the black woman evidently), the Report made no attempt at demanding a national apology, leave alone making a plea for reparations. It accusingly worried that, "Nearly a quarter of Negro women living in cities who have ever married are divorced, separated, or are living apart from their husbands" (Moynihan 6). The report went on to ratify and quote the findings of Edward Wight Bakke who stated:

> Consider the fact that relief investigators or case workers are normally women and deal with the housewife. Already suffering a loss in prestige and authority in the family because of his failure to be the chief bread winner, the male head of the family feels deeply this obvious transfer of planning for the family's well-being to two women, one of them an outsider. His role is reduced to that of errand boy to and from the relief office. (Moynihan 19)

Instead of indulging the petulance of the black man, the report would have done better to demand state measures to rehabilitate black men *and women*

economically. In complaining about the de-sexing of the black woman, the Report shifted the blame from the white community as well as the black man to the one most victimized i.e. the black woman. The Report believed enfeebled mothers and hypermasculinised men was the antidote to the problem of black racial devolution. Poverty, racism and misguided national health policy were sanctimoniously translated into the "immoral individual action of black mothers" (Roberts, "Punishing Drug Addicts" 169).

Morrison's crafting of embattled mothers is a deeply political response to such state sponsored violence and injustice**.** In her texts the so called 'pathology' of the black mother is re –articulated as the savagery of a racist state and society. When the enslaved Sethe kills her daughter (*Beloved*), or when Florens' enslaved mother gives her away (*A Mercy*), or when Eva, enslaved by racism, burns her son alive (*Sula*), they are not demons drunk on power. Morrison's art reminds us that these are decisions taken under moments of unimaginable powerlessness and constitute possibly the only existentially agential acts possible. For this reason alone these are acts of maternal strength and courage. Morrison employs the brutality of the American national discourse on black motherhood to paradoxically leverage a richly layered space for her fictional mothers. It is a mothering space marked with blood and sweat and rage. It is a space that the white mothers, imprisoned in their sanitised and docile prisons, do not dare to ask for themselves.

Similarly Mrs. Breedlove's inability to truly love her daughter in *The Bluest Eye* needs to be traced back to the hatred of everything black that defines the white supremacist world around her. Victimized by her husband, Mrs. Breedlove turns on the only person weaker than her own self, her daughter Pecola. Cholly, her husband, is himself scarred by white inhumanity. The novel recounts a pitiful scene where two white men shine a torch on young Cholly's behind as he shares a sexual moment with a young girl. They direct a stunned Cholly to copulate with her. That moment turns Cholly from a sexually curious teenager to an animal on heat, or worse still a rapist. The moment also warps his understanding of human relations irrevocably. The narrator observes:

> Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. . . . he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 149)

If the Breedloves are cruel to each other, to their own selves and most distressingly to their child Pecola, it is because they have been brutalized beyond repair by the strangulating racism and poverty around them. Similarly in *God Help the Child,* Sweetness' loathing for her own daughter, who is many shades darker than her, stems from a social order that has made her hate and fear all things black. Bride poignantly confesses to the reader, "I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell. Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me, actually, after a half hearted rub with a soapy washcloth. I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 31).

Morrison's mothers also pose important questions for citizenship. Other-mothering in Morrison comments upon adoptive practices the world over, where babies generally move from the Eastern world to the Western or from poor biological mothers to richer adoptive ones. This entails a complete erasure of the biological mother and the perpetuation of a political order which does nothing to change the equation of power between the biological and the adoptive mother. On the other hand, othermothering, as repeatedly visible in Morrison, generates communal, reciprocal ownership as well as responsibility. Lina, a Native American slave feels immense maternal love for the black slave child, Florens:

> Florens would sigh then, her head on Lina's shoulder and when sleep came the little girl's smile lingered. Mother hunger- to be one –or have one-both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew remained alive, travelling the bone. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 59)

Ondine has spent all her life savings in looking after her husband's niece, Jadine and tells him, "She's not a savings account, Sydney. You don't get interest back" (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 283). She also retains the other-mother's right to reprimand Jadine:

> Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman. . . . You don't need your own natural mother to be a daughter. All you need is to feel a certain way, a certain careful way about people older than you are. (281)

Collins had pointed out how black mothering is carried out against experiences that "typically denigrate their mother's perspective" (319) and that mothers often have to prioritise their "children's physical survival at the high cost of their emotional destruction" (283). It is not surprising that Nel's mother smiles at the white train conductor "like a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjam of the butcher's shop he has been kicked away from only moments before" (Morrison, *Sula* 21). In doing this she loses Nel's respect but ensures her safety. Even worse is the choice, or the lack of it, forced upon Sweetness in *God Help the Child*. Fearing eviction, she forbids the child, Bride, from telling on the paedophile of a landlord even as she publicly applauds, along with the rest of the courtroom, as Bride testifies falsely against a school teacher accused of a similar act.

In Morrison's texts mothering is performed against all the neurosis and fragmentation that a racist society and a neoliberal state inflict on black mothers. Morrison turns on these struggling mothers a gaze that is neither judgemental nor ironical, neither moralistic nor apologetic. It is a valuable, shifting, rich lens. Her texts make you wonder why is it that while maternal mourning is acceptable, even glorified (Mother Mary), maternal rage still lingers on the edge of representation. How is it that when fathers kill their children or offer them up for sacrifice (God the Father, Abraham, Agamemnon) it is configured as a civilizational advance, while mothers killing their children (Medea) is articulated as animalistic reversion? Sethe's killing of Beloved, Ella's starving to death of her five day infant born out of rape in *Beloved*, Eva's burning alive of her son in *Sula*, are maternal acts etched by Morrison with a womanist understanding improbable perhaps in non black accounts. Morrison creates an entirely new ontology for motherhood than what literary representations had allowed so far.

In June 2024 the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. In doing so it took away from American women the freedom to abort –a constitutional right they

had held for almost half a century now. As America debates whether women should be compelled to mother or not, one must also acknowledge how black mothers were never perceived as mothers in their own right. There can be no debate, after all, about women's right to abort, without also discussing their right to mother. Both are reproductive choices and should be available to all women at all times. Under slavery, Black women were reduced to breeders of the next generation of slaves. As slavery gave way to neo slavery they were reduced to mammies to the next generation of white masters. They were not allowed mothering time or mothering rights. America of the 1930s was defined by its racial paranoia about inflated Black numbers. Black wombs moved rather quickly from being a capital to being a liability in the American imagination.

Margaret Sanger hailed as the proto-activist for women's reproductive rights and birth control was also the one to conceptualise the Negro Project (1939-1942). The Project, implemented by the Birth Control Federation of America was a eugenic attempt to curtail Black births for the overall development of the American Dream. Correspondingly the Mississippi Appendectomy project (1920s-1980s), infamously so named by civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hammer, performed uninformed, non consensual hysterectomies on hundreds of black girls, some as young as thirteen years of age. These attempts to forcibly sterilize Black women also inform the linking of probation and Norplant (a subdermal implant contraceptive) for drug addicted mothers. Catherine Albiston observes:

> Although the application of Norplant as a condition of probation seems impartial, poor women of color are most likely to receive the condition because institutional biases make them most likely to be prosecuted for child abuse and drug use during pregnancy. Furthermore, the seemingly impartial application of Norplant as a condition of probation hides how this policy derives from and reinforces stereotypes of poor women of color. The Norplant policy resonates with racist and sexist stereotypes such as the welfare queen, the "evil" woman, and the inadequate mother. . . .
>
> Society readily accepts prevention of pregnancy as a solution to child abuse because controlling the reproductive capacity of women of color is an

> historically accepted practice. Furthermore, the Norplant policy's focus on individual responsibility diverts attention from the systemic causes of child abuse, such as poverty, drug use, and the lack of institutional supports for families. (4-5)

Given that the black community has been historically and generationally victimized, it is but expected that black Americans would be in greater need of state welfare for sheer survival. The US state has repeatedly tried to attack the reproductive rights of black women through welfare programs. There have been repeated attempts to link sterilization with welfare. In 1991, Republican member of the Louisianan House of Representatives, David Duke tabled a bill that offered $ 100 annually to welfare recipients who would consent to using Norplant. This was echoed in 2008 by another Republican Representative, LaBruzzo who believed permanent sterilization, instead of the five year contraception that Norplant offered, ought to be set as a condition for receiving welfare.

American presidents from Reagan to Clinton to Trump have approved campaign ads asserting that Black, single mothers were siphoning off millions of dollars from white, taxpaying citizens. Jina B. Kim opines:

> Presaged by Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report on Black matriarchal households and popularized during Ronald Reagan's 1976 bid for the Republican presidential nomination, the welfare queen offered a story of racialized mothering that would soon become the nation's primary narrative of public dependency. Reagan's depiction of a spendthrift from Chicago's South Side who posed as a mother of 14 to obtain state benefits inaugurated a discourse of policy reform that would breed slogans like George H.W. Bush's "cross-generational dependency," the commonly-invoked "welfare as a way of life," and the Clinton administration's "end of welfare as we know it". (1)

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) implemented under the Democrat President, Bill Clinton, contributed further to the pathologizing of welfare. The Act pandered to the US notion that welfare indicated and encouraged a proclivity for freeloading and idleness. The Work First policy of the Act

mandated that mothers be made to work before they could claim welfare. Disregarding the fact that many of these Black mothers were single parents (a circumstance that Moynihan had blamed these mothers for in the first place), the Act demanded hours away from home. In the meantime white feminist demand for equal working opportunities for women fuelled the demand that black women step into professional roles. It is important to note here that, unlike previously, time spent in the pursuit of degrees in higher education was no longer to be regarded as work. In short, PRWORA gratified white America's desire to punish welfare mothers and forced them out of their homes to pick up ill paid jobs. It also ensured that with limited education and training they do not break through postsecondary levels of achievement.

Essentially for politicians of all hues in the US, 'welfare' became a shorthand for capitalizing on white belligerence against black people, especially black mothers. Meanwhile Sweetness observes, "I wish they would stop calling it welfare and go back to the word they used when my mother was a girl. Then it was called "Relief". Sounds much better, like it's just a short-term breather while you get yourself together. Besides, those welfare clerks are mean as spit" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 7). A Grandmother tells Macon Dead in *Song of Solomon*, "[M]y relief check ain't no more it take to keep a well grown yard dog alive- half alive, I should say"(25-26).

The detailed delineation of black single mother's struggles by Morrison is an acerbic rebuttal to their derisive reduction as 'welfare queens' in the national imaginary. Mothering in Morrison's texts is an excruciating process. It devastates the child, as much as the mother. If nothing else, Morrison reminds us that mothering should never be coerced. It is a killer, even when chosen. It is multiply difficult to mother if one is black. When abortion is made illegal in the US states, black women find themselves more oppressed than white women. Poverty and limited access to affordable contraception for black men lead to black women requiring abortion more than their white counterparts. They are the ones who can afford far less than most white women the travel and logistical expense in travelling from one US state to another where abortion is still possible. Frequently the sheer grind of everyday life compels black women to fear motherhood. In *Jazz*, the child Violet witnessing her mother's suicide due to her inability to fend for her children, concludes:

> Violet never forgot Rose Dear or the place she had thrown herself into- a place so narrow, so dark it was pure, breathing relief to see her stretched in a wooden box. . . . The important thing, the biggest thing Violet got out of that was to never have children. Whatever happened, no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama? (Morrison, *Jazz* 100-101, 102)

The overturning of *Roe* v. *Wade* attacks every woman's right to reproductive autonomy. However it makes the black woman's lives more precarious than the white woman's, caught as she is at the intersection of race and patriarchy. She finds herself left out of the feminist solidarity of non black women as well as the racial support of non white men. The misogyny of the Moynihan report had gone unacknowledged by white women because it was cast in a populist racist idiom. After all a State report which blamed an exhausted mother for the failures of her son and her husband should have offended the white women as much as it did the black women. Conversely fear of ethnic genocide is deployed by black men to deny black women access to abortion. Mansbach and Hagel observe:

> The organizations that link abortion with race often compare abortion with the Holocaust, genocide, and slavery. For example, one such group, *Abortion in the Hood*, uses images of the Planned Parenthood symbol and the Confederate flag under the headline "which one kills 266 black lives everyday?" One of the most radical organizations we studied, *Klan Parenthood*, goes so far as to equate pro-choice advocates to Klan members, featuring an image of a doctor wearing a Klan outfit with the slogan: "Abortion, because Lynching is for Amateurs" on their website's homepage.

Conclusions

Each time we debate the American woman's right to choose, one needs to acknowledge that the right to abort, birth and mother have never been readily and organically available to American women of colour. Surely the denial of the right to abort is only as egregious as enforced birthing or the denial of the right to birth. Under slavery black children were denied their mothers and black women were denied the right to not birth and *by implication the right to abort*. Post slavery black children were

reduced to welfare statistics and their mothers were grudged the right to birth and to mother if they so chose. Poor black babies were looked upon as the "new Bio-Underclass" (Roberts, "Killing the Black Body" 495). They were assumed to be born with an inherently deficient morality. On occasions when black women do choose abortion, they get accused of being promiscuous and sexually irresponsible. In short, whether black women chose to birth or to abort, they get accused of a reproductive overreach. As *Roe* v. *Wade* is overturned and one witnesses the deification of fetal rights over that of a woman's, one needs to acknowledge before anything else that the rights of black mothers or black children have never been truly granted in America.

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