When Rita Dove received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1987 for *Thomas and Beulah*, it established her as a significant American poet. *Thomas and Beulah* proved to be the first volume in a trilogy of poetry about motherhood; companion volumes *Grace Notes* (1989) and *Mother Love* (1995) followed. In these works we see Dove grappling with the notion of maternal ambivalence, something many women experience but are loathe to talk about. Dove interrogates maternal ambivalence from several female vantage points in her poetry and ultimately celebrates the creative powers it bestows upon the women who embrace their struggle with it. This essay looks at a number of Dove's poems and argues that it is only through acknowledging and dealing with maternal ambivalence that women, especially Black women, can truly embrace motherhood in all its complexity.

Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* has been with me for a long time. I first encountered the 1987 Pulitzer Prize--winning volume of poetry in a graduate seminar on Black women writers, and since that time my second-hand copy has grown tattered with rereading. Dove's maternal grandparents have always seemed somehow familiar to me; perhaps it speaks tellingly of Dove's gifts as a poet that a thirtysomething Caucasian woman related so easily to the lives of Depression-era Black folks. But more than a sense of the familiar kept urging me back to *Thomas and Beulah*. Since my initial reading of the text, the poem "Motherhood," which stands approximately at the centre of Beulah's section of the volume, has profoundly disturbed me. As I immersed myself further in African American literature, I encountered numerous portraits of heroic mothering; most of the women whose lives and works I studied combined the pride of Sojourner Truth with the stamina of Harriet Jacobs. Indeed, this was the one enduring quality that drew me to the formal study of African American literature.

And so I found myself returning again and again to Beulah and "Motherhood." I wondered why she, as a new mother, dreamt such horrible dreams, and I particularly questioned her unmitigated ambivalence toward mothering. Cultural norms dictate that women are expected to have children and also perpetuate the notion that the children we have will be soft bundles of joy. Further, women are expected to love their children no matter what and to willingly sacrifice for their offspring. So, while I was educated enough to think critically about society's mandates, I nevertheless found myself continuing to judge Beulah. What was she thinking? Why couldn't she be more like Harriet Jacobs, a woman who was just the kind of mother I fancied that I myself would one day be? The questions bothered me. And then one day I became a mother.

This essay, then, is a bit of a personal odyssey. When my son was born my life took on a new rhythm; his needs became mine as I struggled to understand him. At the same time I was entering the professional arena after years in graduate school. My life was fraught with anxiety and ambivalence; every act, from getting up in the morning to answering a plaintive wail in the middle of the night, seemed to demand something new of me. Mundane professional responsibilities became obstacles to overcome. I turned again to what I had come to view as Beulah's "signature" poem, and I began to understand. Like the "promised land" that her name
evokes, Beulah—who had so perplexed and disturbed me—now beckoned encouragingly. I discovered in Dove's elegant lyricism a portrait of endurance, a message of hope addressed specifically to those who mother. This reading invites Beulah into the company of those mothers responsible for the uplift and the survival of the human race.²

Dove opens the "Beulah" section of Thomas and Beulah with several lines from "Lines to a Nasturtium," by Harlem Renaissance poet Anne Spencer: "Ah, how the senses flood at my repeating, / As once in her fire-lit heart I felt the furies / Beating, beating." The poem, subtitled "A Lover Muses," parallels the beauty of the "flame-flower" with the beckoning of the beloved. The attraction to both, Spencer dramatizes, is paradoxically fulfilling and destructive. The lines from Spencer's poem set the tone for Dove's depiction of Beulah as wife and mother, roles that are both comforting and confining to Beulah. As Emily Walker Cook argues, both Thomas and Beulah adhere to conventional gender expectations typical of Depression-era America. Both, however, feel constrained by society's definitions; Thomas is frequently frustrated by his inability to maintain a comfortable lifestyle for his family, and Beulah chafes under her ever-present domestic obligations.

When I teach this volume of poetry to students in my Black literature and women's studies classes, I pose the following question near the end of our discussion: Who had the happier life, Thomas or Beulah? Inevitably the class members rush to take sides: some argue that Thomas was ultimately able to provide for his family, while Beulah never fulfilled her dreams; others counter that at least Beulah had dreams. Commenting on the process by which she assembled the poems, Dove notes, "Then this poem 'Dusting' appeared, really out of nowhere. I didn't realize that this was Thomas's wife saying, 'I want to talk. And you can't do his side without doing my side'" (Kitchen et al. 236). Indeed, many readers view "Dusting" as typical of Beulah's "side" of her life with Thomas—fraught with frustration, lost promise, suffocating routine. Beulah's heart, once "fire-lit" with dreams of travel and romance, now beats only to the dull rhythm of domestic life.

Consonant with Beulah's domestic duties is her position as primary care-giver of the couple's four daughters, a role Beulah approaches with decided ambivalence. Many, students and scholars alike, who argue that the Beulah section is characterized by despair (as the lines from Spencer's poem initially seem to suggest) turn to the poems about motherhood to support their interpretation. It is my contention, however, that the poems concerning motherhood are the richest in Beulah's section and serve to provide the very measure by which we are able to chart Beulah's growth and development.

As she does in Thomas's section, Dove begins Beulah's section by dramatizing a formative experience. In "Taking in Wash," the narrator tells us that Beulah was "Papa's girl / black though she was." The dream that transforms "Papa's girl" into a "beast / with stricken eyes" suggests that the young Beulah is a victim of sexual abuse, possibly even rape, at the hands of her father³ and also establishes the motif of dreaming that will structure the entire section. Beulah's mother figures prominently in the first poem as well. "Mama never changed," the narrator tells us; she attempts to act proactively each time her husband comes home drunk, hiding the laundry and hushing the dog, but the third stanza indicates that her efforts are insignificant. A grim, unaffectionate woman described as a "tight, dark fist," her complicity in
Beulah's abuse is implied in the warning she offers in the closing lines of the poem: "Touch that child / and I'll cut you down / just like the cedars of Lebanon."

Beulah's relationship with her mother is as formative as her relationship with her father and, although significantly different, no less destructive. The title of the first poem, "Taking in Wash," refers, in fact, to Beulah's mother, who presumably takes in laundry to supplement her husband's income. It is the first of numerous homely images that will serve to structure Beulah's section, suggesting that Beulah is heir to her mother's domestic realm and its attendant powerlessness. In particular, the ineffectual nature of the protection Beulah's mother offers her weighs heavily as Beulah contemplates becoming a mother herself. In assessing what she has to offer her own children, Beulah fears that she will let them down because this was her experience as a child.

Offsetting the anxiety Beulah feels toward impending motherhood is the expectant joy she shares with Thomas as they prepare for the birth of their first child. The poem "Weathering Out" conveys Beulah's tremendous anticipation as she enjoys the final months of pregnancy. Her coffee, "flushed with milk," tastes just right; she "float[s]" from room to room and feels "large and placid" like the zeppelin she and Thomas go to view at the new airdock. Although Thomas is discouraged in his job search, he is attentive to Beulah and the unborn child: "Little fellow's really talking," he'd say, as he listened to her belly in bed at night. In fact, the only indication of Beulah's hesitancy in this poem occurs when she mentally contradicts Thomas's interpretation of the baby's attempts to communicate with them: "to her it was more the pok-pok-pok / of a fingernail tapping a thick cream lampshade." The poem's tone is optimistic; in keeping with the spirit of the volume, the couple's hardships are alluded to, but the concluding image of the clover between the cobblestones that hangs "stubbornly on" in spite of the winter frost suggests that the young family will "weather out" their storms together. The ellipses with which Dove ends the poem suggest that there will indeed be storms.

The next poem, entitled simply "Motherhood," dramatizes one such storm. Powerfully evocative of both a fairy tale and a nightmare, the poem's imagery implies that for Beulah the act of becoming a mother has the potential to be both fulfilling and destructive. Significantly, the first verb in the poem is "dreams." Furthering the dream motif begun in the second poem, "Magic," which articulates Beulah's dream of trading life in her parents' home for the wonders of Paris, the first stanza describes Beulah's literal dreams as a new mother: first she misplaces the baby, then she drops it and it disappears. Finally, the baby explodes before her eyes. The early lines of this poem clearly reflect the feelings of inadequacy and overbearing responsibility that bombard Beulah upon the birth of her child.

The movement into the second stanza deflects Beulah's anxieties as we journey with the new family on an outing to the countryside. Indeed, Dove depicts a pastoral moment, only to shatter it with the appearance of the three men "playing rough with a white wolf." Here the poem takes on a surreal quality, as Beulah helplessly shouts a warning and then must fight the wolf herself to protect her child. Interestingly, Thomas and the three men disappear entirely from the poem; with her baby on her back, Beulah "straddles / the wolf and circles its throat." She tames the wolf into submission, blooding its fur, and the poem ends with perhaps the most ambiguous image in the volume: "The small wild eyes / go opaque with confusion and shame, like a child's."
So whose eyes are these? Literally they are the wolf's; in her panic, Beulah sees them as "like a child's," suggesting her mixed emotions at conquering the white wolf. Metaphorically the eyes are not only the child's, looking reproachfully at the new mother, but also Beulah's own, reflecting the overbearing and solitary responsibilities of motherhood her nightmare picnic evokes. The poem "Motherhood," then, is deeply disturbing to many readers for the degree to which it portrays Beulah's ambivalence. In this reading motherhood becomes, simply, a nightmare.

This reading becomes all the more troubling when viewed through the lens of race. Beulah is, after all, a Black woman only a couple of generations removed from slavery. She would have been extremely conscious of the lengths to which her enslaved maternal ancestors went to resist the biological contradictions of enslaved motherhood; Beulah's heritage would almost certainly have included stories of heroic mothering--women who learned to read and sometimes tutored their children; who instilled in their children a sense of self-worth that served to contradict their enslaved condition; who fought to keep their families together; who served as othermothers to slave children separated from their own mothers; who developed extended kin networks to provide and receive support, encouragement, and everyday assistance; and who sometimes, as in the case of Margaret Garner, resorted to violence. These facts are the legacy of slavery bequeathed to the twentieth-century Black woman. Beulah would have been aware, too, of the high value placed on motherhood in the contemporary African American community. And so, aware of her privilege and her duty to claim her children fully as her enslaved maternal ancestors never could, Beulah's racial consciousness would certainly have painfully magnified her feelings of ambivalence.

Recent scholarship, however, sheds interesting light on the nature of Beulah's ambivalence and offers an alternative to reading Beulah's life as dominated by guilt and despair. In her 1995 book Mother Love / Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence, Rozsika Parker emphasizes the potentially creative aspect of maternal ambivalence. Building on Jane Lazarre's theory that ambivalence is the most eternal and natural emotion in mothers, Parker argues that a mother's capacity for nurturing both herself and her offspring is greatly augmented once ambivalence is acknowledged. In other words, conflict and conflicting emotions can serve to catalyze self-awareness and can bridge the understanding gap that necessarily exists between mothers and their children.

Cultural representations of the mother, of course, eschew ambivalence; the mother who straps her child on her back and fights off the big, bad wolf not only takes great pride in her accomplishment--proof of her maternal instinct--but is valorized by a society intent on maintaining her position with children within the domestic sphere. But Parker contends that ambivalence is, in fact, crucial both for the development of a healthy maternal identity and for the eventual process of separation that children must undergo:

The experience of maternal ambivalence ... provides a woman with a sense of her independent identity. The pain of ambivalence, the distress in recognising that the child hates her for frustrating its desires, and that she hates the child for frustrating her independent needs, can be a force for affirming her independent identity. Both mother and child need the mother's affirmation
of her own needs, desires, opinions, rage, love and hatred if separateness is to be established--
and thus relationship.(137)

This theory brings us to the opening line of Dove's poem "Daystar," which almost immediately follows "Motherhood": "She wanted a little room for thinking." Here Beulah articulates a strategy for coping with children; like Virginia Woolf and all other women leading multifaceted lives, she recognizes the need for a place of her own. That she wants to "think" while the children nap rather than do laundry (as her mother may have done) or pick up toys indicates that Beulah recognizes the importance of maintaining some semblance of cognitive activity and stimulation while surrounded by infants and toddlers. Sitting in her quiet spot behind the house in the lawn chair she has "lugge
d, Beulah rests, observes nature, and sometimes simply gets in touch with herself: "Star[ing] until she was assured / when she closed her eyes / she'd see only her own vivid blood." When her daughter appears, calling her back to her domestic duties and inquiring what in the world she is doing, Beulah's answer is significant: "Why, / building a palace." Beulah's dreams have returned.

The concluding stanza of the poem suggests that Beulah can revisit her special place via her imagination whenever she chooses. When Thomas "roll[s] over / lurche[s] into her" at night, she retreats to the essential self she has discovered in the yard behind the house and becomes "nothing/pure nothing." The lines may suggest the lack of fulfillment Beulah experiences in her sexual relationship with her husband; as Cook argues, "sexual domination ... comprised a part of Beulah's gender role that she must accept, even if she never became completely resigned to it" (326). I choose to read Beulah's becoming "nothing" during sex with Thomas as an affirmation of her newly emerging self; the Beulah in the final stanza of "Daystar" is a woman who has found some healthy measure of freedom not only from the demands of motherhood and household management but also from the baggage of her childhood encounters with her father.

Immediately following "Daystar" is the short poem "Obedience," which my reading privileges as the climax of Beulah's section for the way in which it dramatizes Beulah's relationship to the world around her and recontextualizes her relationship with her children. The tentativeness of the first stanza is established by two words: "if" and "perhaps": "That smokestack, for instance, / in the vacant lot across the street: / if she could order it down and watch / it float in lapse-time over buckled tar and macadam / it would stop an inch or two perhaps / before her patent leather shoes." Perhaps Beulah sees her own children reflected in the stubborn unwillingness to yield that characterizes the smokestack; in any event, the smokestack does not "obey."

The final two stanzas, however, affirm the powers Beulah does possess. First, "her mind is free." In other words, she still has her dreams. The following lines conjure up a wonderful twilight--colourful, peaceful, homey. But she revises her imaginative rendering of the twilight scene in the first line of the last stanza: "but she would never create such puny stars." One wonders what has prompted this implied critique of God, but the moment is again revised as Beulah's thoughts turn to her home and its inhabitants. In what I read to be the most moving lines in the entire volume, Beulah reflects on her children: "those tight hearts breathing inside-- / she could never invent them." Here Beulah acknowledges the miracle her children are in her life--individuals so wonderful and complex that even in her cherished, carefully cultivated dream life she could not
have imagined them. These lines signal Beulah's acceptance of her role as mother--a role enhanced by the ambivalence she has struggled with throughout her adult life.

I do not mean to suggest at this point that Beulah has completely conquered the feelings of ambivalence that characterize her relationship with her children, merely that she has channelled those feelings in constructive, creative ways that enable her to find fulfillment in her everyday life amid the sacrifice and loss of self inherent in motherhood. In naming the section "Canary in Bloom," Dove tips the scales in Beulah's favour, I think, implying from the beginning that Beulah, like her beloved bird, will one day "bloom." The tension that propels the "Beulah" section develops from the conflicting desires portrayed: the canary, with its suggestions of beauty, song, and intended flight, and the womb, which serves to anchor Beulah to her home and family. The ambivalence motherhood evokes in Beulah initially exacerbates what Beulah perceives to be impossible drives at work within her; she loves her children, but she will never get to Paris. Only when she renegotiates her relationship with herself does she come to understand that her dreams may find many expressions. The canary is, after all, a caged bird, its song notwithstanding.

The poems that follow "Obedience" reflect Beulah's contentment with her life; she exhibits pride in her handiwork in "Headress," and recalls her mother with a new fondness in "Sunday Greens." And her own "compendium"--her final assessment of her life with Thomas in the poem "Company"--is tender: "listen: we were good / though we never believed it." It seems, following "Obedience," that Beulah has made her peace with her children and with herself; these poems do not merely indicate that her life goes on but rather suggest that she has successfully integrated the many complex aspects of her personality and the many conflicting demands she feels as a woman living in the twentieth century. Dove alludes to the measure of Beulah's success as a mother by including Joanna's proud statement in the poem "Wingfoot Lake": "Mother, we're Afro-Americans now!" No longer confused or ashamed--this is the gift that Beulah has allowed herself to receive from her children; this, too, is the gift she gives back to her daughters.

Lotta Lofgren, in an article entitled "Partial Horror: Fragmentation and Healing in Rita Dove's Mother Love," argues that Thomas and Beulah and Dove's next two volumes of poetry, Grace Notes (1989) and Mother Love (1995), constitute "a kind of trilogy of the cycles of human existence" (142). Lofgren maintains that Dove's overriding subject matter has been the nuclear family, which she examines from a variety of perspectives. In Thomas and Beulah Dove begins with the foundational relationship between a husband and wife, specifically that shared by her maternal grandparents; in Grace Notes the poetry becomes even more personal, as she includes a number of poems written in the voice of a new mother, poems that reflect her own experiences as the mother of a daughter. Mother Love, then, finishes the cycle. This volume--Dove's most complex to date--is her reworking of the Demeter/Persephone myth. According equal time to both mother and daughter, Dove takes as her theme the process of individuation, that moment of final separation that every mother both anticipates and fears. In the last poem of the volume the speaker articulates the moment of awareness toward which the volume has been inexorably moving:

Through sunlight into flowers
she walked, and was pulled down. A simple story, a mother’s deepest dread—that her child could drown in sweetness.

Lofgren contends that *Mother Love* "complete[s] the journey, finding regeneration through fragmentation as the newborn daughter of *Grace Notes* grows up and the cycle begins anew" (142).

Indeed, the poetry in *Mother Love* seems to move some of Dove's concepts in *Grace Notes* to a higher level. Many of the poems in the earlier volume celebrate motherhood unabashedly; there is little evidence of the ambivalence I noted in *Thomas and Beulah*. For example, in "Pastoral" the speaker marvels at the joy she feels while breast-feeding; although she is "diminished / by those amazing gulps," she is at peace, dozing as contentedly as her newborn in the final lines of the poem. "After Reading *Mickey in the Night Kitchen* for the Third Time Before Bed" is also life-affirming and exuberant, as the speaker shares her daughter's innocent explorations of the female body. This poem dramatizes the mother's relaxed attitude and sheer delight in her daughter's curiosity, but it must be noted that their relationship is not all giddiness. The mother has clearly prepared her daughter for the dangers inherent in growing up female. She also is aware that as the mother of a biracial child she must invest her child with a healthy sense of self and racial identity. The menstrual blood alluded to in the final stanza of the poem prefigures the bond of womanhood these two will one day share, the bond that is already taking shape and being shaped. And the tone is similar in "Genetic Expedition," as the speaker contemplates the beauty of her own abundant breasts and spreading buttocks before going on to seek genetic evidence of herself in her toddler daughter. This poem, in my estimation, is a near-perfect parallel to "Obedience" in *Thomas and Beulah*, in the wonder evoked at the creation of a child. The sentiment is also expressed in "The Breathing, The Endless News":

Children know this: they are the trailings of gods. Their eyes hold nothing at birth then fill slowly with the myth of ourselves.

With *Mother Love*, however, Dove reintroduces the notion of maternal ambivalence. The title itself suggests the volume's theme, and Dove dedicates the poetry "FOR my mother TO my daughter." In the foreword, entitled "An Intact World," Dove discusses her attraction to the Demeter/Persephone myth. Calling the myth "a tale of a violated world" (i), she goes on to characterize the story as "a modern dilemma as well--there comes a point when a mother can no longer protect her child, when the daughter must go her own way into womanhood" (i). Robert McDowell points out that one of Dove's great strengths as a poet is "understand[ing] the opposing sides of conflicts she deals with. She tells all sides of the story" (294). Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Mother Love*.

In a sense, writing *Thomas and Beulah* (more so than *Grace Notes*) has prepared Dove for her ambitious analysis of the complex relationship shared by mothers and daughters. Not only has she told the story of her maternal grandparents' marriage from both perspectives, but she has
resisted the temptation to present Beulah as the stereotypically content mother. As I have noted, the couple's four children are noticeably absent from the volume; *Mother Love*, then, picks up where *Thomas and Beulah* leaves off, giving voice to both sides of the conflict. The mother remembers her own mother in "Party Dress for a First Born": "When I ran to my mother, waiting radiant / as a cornstalk at the edge of the field, / nothing else mattered: the world stood still." The daughter calls plaintively for her mother in "Persephone Abducted" but soon is ready to be free of her mother's protective instinct; in Part II of "Persephone in Hell" she says,

Mother worried. Mother with her frilly ideals

gave me money to call home every day,

but she couldn't know what I was feeling;

I was doing what she didn't need to know.

The struggle to separate does not come easily for either, and Dove infuses her speakers—mothers and daughters sometimes indistinguishable from each other—with a wide range of emotions.

By far, though, the rawest emotions belong to Demeter and the other mother figures in the collection. For the daughters, maturation is a time of celebration; they look only ahead to a future beckoning brightly. For the mothers, the pride they feel in their maturing daughters is muted by feelings of incompleteness, helplessness, and, frankly, devastation. Such mixed emotions are alluded to in a number of poems narrated from the mother's perspective. In "The Bistro Styx," a mother joins her daughter abroad; they meet for lunch and the speaker discovers that her daughter has grown beyond the limits of her imagination. The generation gap manifests itself in the mother's inability to appreciate her daughter's new lifestyle, and the poem concludes with the mother's desperate thought: "I've lost her. ..." "Demeter Waiting" expresses the mother's anger vehemently; these are perhaps the strongest lines in the collection:

She is gone again and I will not bear
it, I will drag my grief through a winter
of my own making and refuse
any meadow that recycles itself into
hope. Shit on the cicadas, dry meteor
flash, finicky butterflies! I will wail and thrash
until the whole goddamned golden panorama freezes
over. Then I will sit down to wait for her. Yes.

"Demeter Mourning" begins with the line "Nothing can console me," and concludes with the mother's acknowledgment that nothing will make her happy again, "for I have known that." Juxtaposed nicely to "Demeter Mourning" is "Exit," which offers "Reprieve ... 'provisionally'" from the anguish of loss that monopolizes the mother's thoughts. Here she admits to herself that her daughter has become an independent woman and even congratulates herself for the role she has played in her daughter's development. And in "Demeter's Prayer to Hades," which may be read as conciliatory, Demeter offers the benefit of her own insight to Hades, cautioning him to recognize that "we are responsible for the lives / we change. No faith comes without cost, / no one believes without dying."
Indeed, the volume is filled with images of death and dying; Dove implies that the inevitable growth of the child to survival on her own is a lifeblow to the mother. Lofgren contends that "Demeter's hardest lesson in the cyclical process of growth and change in which she and Persephone participate involves recognizing her own monstrous selfishness in wishing to keep her daughter with her. She must acknowledge that her excruciating sense of fragmentation at her daughter's departure is not only inevitable but crucial to the cyclical nature of human existence" (140). In dramatizing Demeter's struggle to accept the loss of what is essentially a part of herself, Dove brings us back to Beulah's lesson: that to mother means to give up an essential part of the self. We meet Beulah at the beginning of the journey of mothering; although she resents the loss of self inherent in mothering, it is her negotiation of these feelings that ultimately enables her to flesh out an inner, private self, one filled with dreams and noticeably devoid of ghosts. Demeter represents the logical conclusion to Beulah's story; the woman who has found her self (through loss of self) in the life-giving relationship with her child (or children) then must deal with the betrayal she feels when the life-sustaining force separates.

The loss of the child--a constant motif throughout the volume--is graphically portrayed in the title poem. The reader might easily envision this as one of Beulah's poems, placed close in sequence to "Motherhood." "Mother Love" begins with the powerful question, "Who can forget the attitude of mothering?" and goes on to dramatize the maternal cues that quickly become second nature to any mother: holding the child comfortably "on the hip," "bar[ing] the nipple," "hum[ming] at bedtime." The poem transforms, however, in the second stanza, becoming a nightmarish vision akin to Beulah's in "Motherhood." Of the child she has been given to raise, the speaker says,

I decided to save him. Each night
I laid him on the smoldering embers,
sealing his juices in slowly so he might
be cured to perfection.12

The image of the mother preserving the child by curing him over the fire grotesquely perverts the ideal of the nurturing, protective mother. This poem dramatizes the dangers of narcissistic mothering; Lofgren argues that if mother love becomes preoccupied with self-gratification it turns destructive.

No one can achieve perfection for another human individual, even a child; the child must strive for--and fail at--itself. Any attempt to "seal the juices" of the child, to "cure" the child by isolating it from the outside world, is brutality. Such an attempt at false autonomy will kill the child, spiritually if not physically. The greatest potential betrayal consists not in Olympian deception but in Demeter's refusal to allow Persephone regeneration (140). The central poem clearly stands as a warning of the costs of "motherlove too thick" (164), to borrow a phrase from Toni Morrison's 1987 best-selling novel Beloved.13 Yet the volume quickly distances itself from the explicit violence of the title poem; Demeter grieves loudly, becomes hopeful, sulks, but commits no violence against the self or the other. Just as Beulah must resolve the shame and confusion motherhood thrusts upon her, so Demeter must learn to make the ultimate sacrifice--to let her child go. The loss of the child, beginning at birth, is a reality that she will always be
forced to remember, as the final line of the poem makes clear; the child's process of individuation becomes one of the "attitudes of mothering" ingrained in the mother's being.

We do not see the transformative power of maternal ambivalence as clearly in Mother Love, but it is there. Thomas and Beulah becomes the lens through which to interpret Demeter's crisis in the later volume, illustrating that maternal ambivalence is the foundation on which the healthy relationship with the daughter has been built, and as such it is the coping mechanism that will finally allow Demeter to confront "a mother's deepest dread" and to wish her daughter, who we learn in the poem "History" is herself an expectant mother, the joy she herself has known. Mother Love complements Thomas and Beulah by allowing us to see the intimate and sometimes stormy relationship between mother and daughter that of necessity is missing in the earlier volume. And again it is very human poetry, poetry that speaks to mothers from all walks of life. Even those mothers unfamiliar with Greek mythology can recognize something of themselves in the mother who provides her grown daughter with money to phone home, in the mother who may endanger her child's life in the name of protecting him, in the difficult process of growth and separation for two humans who were once so intimately connected. "No story's ever finished," Dove tells us near the end of the volume's final poem, just as the privilege of mothering is never fully resolved, the responsibility never completely relinquished. Dove's poetry, then, celebrates the privilege and the responsibility, affirming motherhood in all its terrible beauty.

Notes

1. Sojourner Truth (c. 1799-1883) was enslaved until she was legally emancipated in 1827. She subsequently became a preacher and an abolitionist and is known especially for the speech she gave at an Akron, Ohio, women's rights meeting in 1851, during which she asked, "Ar'n't I a woman?" Harriet Jacobs (c. 1813-1897) was enslaved in Edenton, North Carolina, until she escaped by hiding in her grandmother's attic for almost seven years. She chose to hide locally rather than flee to the North so that she could remain close to her two children. Purchased and set free finally in 1853, she published her slave narrative Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in 1861.

2. Although Thomas and Beulah are African American, Dove is not particularly race conscious in her depiction of their life together. Therefore, my comments here refer to Beulah simply as a mother. Later in this essay, however, I will discuss the legacy of slavery as it affects the twentieth-century Black mother.

3. While it is not my intention here to make the argument that Beulah was definitively the victim of sexual assault or rape at the hands of her father, I will point out that the poems in which Beulah's father appears have an ominous quality; for example, on Beulah's wedding day ("Promises") her father is depicted as a "mountain of shame" and as a "hulk" in the vestibule whom she tries to "forget" and literally turns her back on. The poem "Anniversary" ends with Beulah's father winking suggestively at her. One might interpret Beulah's recurrent nightmares as a symptom of abuse and her daydreams of travel as an attempt to escape. Her mother's role is unclear; although she threatens her husband, the cumulative effect of the poems suggests that she never follows through on her threats, thus allowing the abuse to continue.
4. In this same spirit, Cook points out that Beulah's section appears after Thomas's, is shorter than Thomas's, and lacks the "in-control" types of titles found in Thomas's section.

5. Margaret Garner (1833-1858) was a Kentucky slave who fled to Ohio with her four children. When slave catchers approached, Garner attempted to kill her children; she succeeded in wounding three of them and in nearly decapitating her two-year-old daughter. Garner is the historical model for the protagonist Sethe in Toni Morrison's 1987 novel Beloved.

6. See Patricia Hill Collins's 1987 article "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother / Daughter Relationships" (Sage 4, 3-10) for further discussion.

7. It is interesting to note that Beulah has to go outside of the physical confines of the home itself to create her own place. Dove perhaps suggests that it is impossible within the confines of domestic space for Beulah to develop a perspective that is distinct from that cultivated by her roles as wife and mother.

8. Peter Harris, in a review of Thomas and Beulah (The Virginia Quarterly Review 64, 262-76), offers a significantly different reading of these lines, arguing that after Thomas's death Beulah leads a "dignified, though sadly reduced widowhood, where the best that she can say about her marriage is 'we were good, / though we never believed it'' (272).

9. Dove not only modernizes the Demeter/Persephone myth, but she chooses the sonnet, which she calls "an intact world" (Mother Love i), as her primary form of creative expression in this volume. For an excellent analysis of the function of the sonnet form in Mother Love, see Stephen Cushman's article "And the Dove Returned" (Callaloo 19, 131-34).

10. It is not my intention here to offer a detailed analysis of maternal ambivalence in Mother Love. Lofgren provides a fine explication of the complexities of the mother--daughter dynamics that underpin the volume.

11. However, as Alison Booth points out in "Abduction and Other Severe Pleasures: Rita Dove's Mother Love" (Callaloo 19, 125-30), the title is deceptive. She states, "Mother love can mean 'Protection,' tutelage in fatal gender roles, possessive grief, devouring rage, deceptive or strategic calm" (128).

12. Lofgren points out that Dove borrows the image directly from the original myth: "in gratitude for hospitality offered her, Demeter roasts the boy Demophon to make him immortal, but the process is interrupted, and he dies" (140).

13. Dove's poem and Morrison's novel both comment on the dangers of loving the "beloved" too intensely. In the poem it is the child who is sacrificed; in Morrison's novel, although the child dies, it is the mother who makes the greater sacrifice, both in the loss of the child and in her refusal to recognize that her self is her "best thing" (273).

Works Cited


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