

BELOVED: A POLITICAL COMPOSITION

by

KIMBERLY ROSE ROTTER

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Dr. Holly Blackford

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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By KIMBERLY ROSE ROTTER

Thesis Director:

Dr. Carol Singley

Abstract

The emergent term, traumatic fiction describes the extraordinary violence inflicted on individuals and groups during a traumatic twentieth-century history which encompasses two world wars, various genocides, the Great Depression, and the Cold War. Traumatic fiction narratives mirror the neurosis of traumatic experience by distorting conventional narrative structures and using literary techniques like fragmentation, textual gaps, and repetition. They critique the social, economic, and political structures which make and maintain trauma. Traumatic fiction narratives focus on the problems of amnesia and memory in the construction of the historical narrative. It questions a “true” historical narrative by focusing on traditionally suppressed voices.

Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved* (1987) exemplifies this genre of traumatic fiction. However, critics have confused Toni Morrison's traumatic fiction writing style with music. Critics like Lars Eckstein, Peter J. Capuano, and Joanna Wolfe focus their analysis on Morrison's "jazzthetic" quality or the novel's similarities to a slave song; they also argue that the numerous songs incorporated in the novel make the musical quality of her writing essential to understanding this novel. By focusing on the supposed musical quality of her writing, critics have missed Morrison's political purpose.

This paper argues that *Beloved* shows that the dominant white culture, historically contemptuous of the black experience, defines slavery in ways that create trauma for black Americans. Traumatic fiction, it suggests, allows Morrison to access the past and rewrite slavery's narrative. Traumatic techniques allow Morrison to transform her readers into co-witnesses so that a victim's trauma can be externalized, giving the victims much-needed distance from their trauma. That distance allows victims to revisit, reflect, rework, and retell history from a black perspective in order to transcend shame of slavery imposed by white society. Morrison uses traumatic fiction techniques because they provide a language, unmarked by white discourse, for Morrison to tell a black story of slavery that resists forgetting and silencing. Morrison challenges the seemingly authenticated historical story that upholds individualism in order to create room for a new black cultural memory that highlights community, which is its true story.

Preface

The first time I encountered Toni Morrison's *Beloved* I was a student teaching, and the class was unsatisfied with the novel. Students struggled, as I did, to understand *Beloved*: is she Sethe's dead baby who comes back for revenge, a slave girl who is sexually abused, the legacy of slavery that haunts everyone, a manifestation of Denver's damaged psyche, or even a figment of the town's imagination? Six years later, I was reintroduced to the novel in Dr. Carol Singley's graduate class. Remembering my first experience with the novel, I attempt here to address my former students' concerns and explain the ambiguity of *Beloved*.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction: No Ordinary Musical Ditty | 1 |
| Slavery's Influential Legacy | 5 |
| The Reader's Role in Revision of Recorded History | 11 |
| Language as a Racist Discourse | 19 |
| Lines Viewed Through a Traumatic Fiction Lens | 21 |
| Coda | 39 |
| Works Consulted | 40 |

Beloved: A Political Composition

No Ordinary Musical Ditty

Toni Morrison's writing, which uses repetition, call and response, and modification, has a distinctive musical quality. Critics like Lars Eckstein, Peter J. Capuano, and Joanna Wolfe focus their analysis on Morrison's "jazzthetic" quality or on *Beloved's* similarities to a slave song; they also argue that the numerous songs incorporated in the novel make the musical quality of her writing essential to understanding this novel. For example, Lars Eckstein analyzes the excerpt below and compares it to John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme":

Beloved
You are my sister
You are my daughter
You are my face; you are me
I have found you again; you have come back to me
You are my Beloved
You are mine
You are mine
You are mine (255-56)

He shows that Morrison incorporates a "riff or theme ['Beloved. She is mine.'] that is varied, rephrased, and explored exhaustively in solo-excursions of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved" before ending in a communal chorus (272). Morrison's musical aesthetic seems

apparent in this melodious exchange. Eckstein ends his essay with a side note, almost an afterthought, in which he examines the “ideological implications . . . of Morrison’s adoption of jazz” (282). He states that jazz creates a relationship between performer and audience, and that this relationship allows the performer to make some sense of that past by indulging in and expressing his/her trauma.

I believe that while Eckstein and other critics, like Wolfe and Capuano, illustrate a musical quality to Morrison’s writing, their analytical focus is too narrow. They confuse the motivation for her writing with the form of that writing. Eckstein is on the right track when he argues that the musical quality is the inspiration behind this book and that this quality allows Morrison to examine African Americans’ traumatic past. Yet Morrison denies this claim of the supremacy of music to her artwork. Although she admits that she strives for a musical “flavor” to her writing, she “detests being called a ‘poetic writer.’” She seems to think that the attention that has been paid to the lyricism of her work . . . denies her stories their power and resonance” (Schappell 62). If Morrison’s musical writing is the key to understanding her novels, why does she downplay the poetic nature of her writing? Why does she believe that focus on its jazzthetic quality prevents readers from appreciating her novels? Could something else besides an imitation of music account for the novel’s repetition, call and response form, and lack of chronological order? Could understanding her real motivation behind the novel explain the form?

Despite Roland Barthes’s claim that the author is dead and does not matter in the interpretation of his/her work, I believe that Morrison’s motivation is crucial to understanding the novel. Her motivation dictates the form she uses. Morrison stresses that

“good art has always been political” (“Conversation with Alice” 3) and that “a novel should be unquestionably political” (“Conversation with Toni” 238). In this paper, I will argue that Morrison’s lyricism is a side effect of this goal. In comments reminiscent of W. E. B. DuBois’s famous statement that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line,” Morrison’s lamentation that “[m]y people are being devoured” (“Language Must Not Sweat” 121) in an America that is “Star-spangled. Race strangled” (Bousan 100) provides a clue to her political goal. I will argue that *Beloved* shows that the dominant white culture, historically contemptuous of the black experience, defines slavery in a way that creates trauma, double-consciousness, and shame for black Americans. I will show that Morrison uses traumatic fiction techniques to accomplish her political purpose of redefining the narrative of slavery from a black perspective. These techniques happen to mirror musical forms like jazz to allow voices, emotion, memories, and experiences to amalgamate.

Traumatic fiction is an emergent term developed to describe the narrative representation of extraordinary violence inflicted on individuals and groups during a traumatic twentieth-century history, which encompasses two world wars, various genocides, the Great Depression, and the Cold War. This genre originated in the 1980s from an increased awareness in literature of suffering. Traumatic fiction analyzes and questions how trauma affects the construction of history, asking what will be remembered, how will it be remembered, and why it will be remembered? traumatic fiction focuses on the problems of amnesia and memory in the construction of the historical narrative. It questions a “true” historical narrative by focusing on traditionally

suppressed voices in order to recover the stories of “the denied, the repressed, and the forgotten” and “reshape[s] cultural memory through personal contexts, adopting testimonial traits to prevent and bear witness against such repetitive horrors” (Whitehead 82, 5). Traumatic fiction narratives mirror the neurosis of traumatic experience by distorting conventional narrative structures, using literary techniques like fragmentation, textual gaps, and repetition. It critiques the social, economic, and political structures that make and maintain trauma because “[t]rauma can be a powerful indicator of oppressive cultural institutions and practices” (Vickroy 4).

In this paper, I will explore how traumatic fiction allows Morrison to access the past and rewrite slavery’s narrative. Black people are reluctant to revisit their past to reclaim their stories because of the pain associated with slavery. Traumatic techniques allow Morrison to transform her readers into co-witnesses so that a victim’s trauma can be externalized, giving the victims much-needed distance from their trauma. That distance allows victims to revisit, reflect, rework, and retell history from a black perspective in order to transcend slavery’s shame. Language is problematic for a black writer because of its hidden racist tones, so Morrison uses traumatic fiction techniques because they provide a language, unmarked by white discourse, for Morrison to tell a black story of slavery that resists forgetting and silencing. I will show how Morrison challenges the power of the Western narrative by questioning the seemingly authenticated historical story that upholds individualism in order to create room for a new black cultural memory that highlights community, which is its true story.

Slavery's Influential Legacy

Freud describes trauma as a “wound that cries out” (Caruth 4). To initiate healing, trauma must be verbalized in order for victims to come to terms with their experiences. Morrison, though, believes that ex-slaves did not candidly write about their “wounds,” their traumatic life experiences. They were muzzled, for “popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience. Over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, ‘But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate’” (“Site of Memory” 110). Since ex-slaves have not yet spoken frankly about their experiences, African Americans are traumatized, depressed people who feel helpless and exhibit “a general closing off of the spirit, as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm” (Caruth 184).

In *Beloved*, every slave who suffers various abuses like rape, beatings, or death because of slavery has not told his/her story; consequently, every slave demonstrates symptoms of trauma. Paul D wears a dehumanizing bit in his mouth. This experience almost drives him crazy for a “wildness . . . shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. Days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed one the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye” (84). Denver goes deaf and then becomes a hermit due to slavery's legacy. Sethe's eyes are empty and “did not pick up a flicker of light” (10) because her master, schoolteacher, “punched the glittering iron out of Seth's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight” (11). As a result, Sethe has a death wish: she “secretly longed to die” (20). Survival itself

“can be a crisis” for survivors of trauma, so they exhibit an “apparent struggle to die” (Caruth 9, 63). Baby Suggs, who is “[s]uspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of death” (4) does not want to live because “[b]eing alive was the hard part” (8). Baby Suggs simply climbs into her bed and slowly dies because “[h]er past had been like her present-intolerable” (4). Morrison shows that even though slavery no longer exists in this country, it still has the power to crush black people’s spirits.

Morrison believes that ex-slaves were not given an opportunity to work through their trauma because their stories “had to be authenticated by white patrons, [so] they couldn’t say everything they wanted to say” (“Toni Morrison: Art” 75). Morrison believes that since black writers had to make their experiences palpable to their white audiences, they “forgot” many important events and suppressed their egoism and subjectivity. Morrison shows through the infanticide episode that white, western culture instead has written slavery’s narrative. Sethe and her four children escape slavery by running away from Sweet Home. Her master, schoolteacher, finds the family and tries to re-enslave them. To protect them from schoolteacher and to prevent them from becoming slaves again, Sethe tries to murder her children, succeeding in killing her daughter. The infanticide is Sethe’s story to tell the audience, and telling it will provide her with an opportunity to explain her actions and give her a chance to verbalize the traumatic event. Yet she is silenced. The only person to describe the story to the audience is a white, judgmental slave catcher. Only slave owners and abolitionists write about or explain the event, through newspaper articles and in court, leaving no room for Sethe’s own story. White people manipulate Sethe’s story for their own ends, rendering Sethe silent.

The white narrative of slavery belittles black experience. Morrison explores this derision through her white characters and their view that black people are an inferior race. Schoolteacher dehumanizes slaves by recording their animalistic qualities in his little book. Schoolteacher believes slaves are animals and that “God had given [white people] the responsibility of’ caring for the inferior race (150). He compares the process of “educating” and “nurturing” his slaves to training and raising horses. Even sympathetic white characters like the “good-willed whitewomen, preacher, speaker, or newspaperman” (14) who seem to help Sethe, have “revulsion in their eye” (14). Mr. Garner, an apparently fair man, is a slave-owner and believes in the supremacy of the white race. He relishes his power to “call and announce [his slaves] men . . . on Sweet Home . . . by his leave” (220). Even Bodwin, an abolitionist who helps runaway slaves, does not view African Americans as equal. His decorations show his true belief. He possesses a racist statue on a shelf by his back door. That statue is “a blackboy’s mouth full of money. His head was thrown back farther than a head could go, his hands were shoved in his pocket. Bulging like moons [were] two eyes . . . Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words ‘At Yo Service’” (255). Bodwin accepts the stereotypical view of the dumb, inferior black man, sold for decoration.

Although the institution of slavery has ended, white narratives have taught African Americans to reject their own subjectivity and authority. African Americans have created in turn a double-consciousness in which they view their culture through the ideologies of the dominant white culture. W.E. Dubois dubs this double-consciousness a “veil”:

[T]he Negro is . . . born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Morrison continuously shows her characters struggling with a double consciousness. Paul D remarks that there is “[n]othing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher” (266) for schoolteacher’s power of labeling hurts his slaves. Paul D questions “[i]s that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman” (125), yet he defines himself according to the amount of money he is worth in white society’s eyes. Paul D acknowledges the power white people have in deforming the black psyche because “Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub” (72). The white people call Baby Suggs Jenny “cause that what’s on your sales ticket,” which prevents Baby Suggs from defining herself, from “discover[ing] what she was like” (140). That is why Baby Suggs “don’t call myself nothing” (142). Sethe internalizes the white definition for her dead baby. Since the “preacher say[s] [Beloved] at the funeral,” Sethe believes that that was “all there was to say, surely” (5) and chooses to inscribe that one word on the baby’s tombstone. Sixo learns “[d]efinitions belonged to the definers [white people]-not the defined [black slaves]” (190).

Current studies in shame provide a psychological reason for this double-consciousness and creation of DuBois’ veil. J. Brooks Bousan explains that since African

Americans have internalized the sense of being different and socially inferior, they possess “psychic scars . . . inscribed in the souls of black folks” (122-23). Bousan explains that these “psychic scars,” which are analogous to DuBois’s notion of double consciousness, are actually shame. Shame creates a “doubleness of experience” (Lewis 107). Central to shame’s experience is the “self-in-the-eyes-of-the-other” (15). Shame is destructive because it destroys a self-image of decency, strength, and autonomy by making individuals “vicarious[ly] experience other’s scorn” (10). Shame arises from internalized racism, from the absorption of negative black feelings in the dominant western ideology, from learned self-contempt.

Morrison shows Sethe struggling with her shame and self-disgust. Sethe cries when she reflects on schoolteacher’s view that slaves possess animal qualities because she is ashamed at being dehumanized. She suffers from her molestation; she feels dirty and used so she believes that “anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up” (251). Dirt replaces her view of herself.

To overcome shame, double-consciousness, and internalized racism; in other words, to recover from the trauma of slavery, black people must reveal the falsity of the contemptuous, white view of slavery and black identity by writing their own stories from their own viewpoint. Morrison writes to reclaim her black identity by debating a white culture that still pegs her as the exotic, mythical black other. She states that “I see [interviewers] select or make up details to add to the fixed idea of me they came in the

door with—the thing or person they want me to be” (“A Conversation: Gloria Naylor” 215). Morrison writes to reclaim her black identity by questioning a white culture in which fellow writers belittle Morrison because of her race, dismissing her as merely an “affirmative action” laureate (Bousman 18). She writes to reclaim her black identity by rejecting a white culture in which most newspapers did not celebrate her Nobel Prize due to her race, instead adopting “an apologetic and defensiveness tone that seemed to ‘account for’ the literary significance of Morrison’s work” (Bousman 18). Morrison writes because she believes that the literary text is a fruitful site to challenge white perception in order to heal an African-American culture damaged by prejudices.

Morrison believes that “the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can’t really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way you can certainly debate it . . . the job of recovery is ours.” To create a black historical narrative, “[y]ou have to stake it out and identify those who have preceded you--[for] resummoning them, acknowledging them is just one step in that process of reclamation” (“An Interview with Toni” 225). Through writing, Morrison reclaims black ancestors in order to tell their stories from a black perspective. Their stories must be worked through, comprehended, and written so that they are not defined by the white ideology that results in crippling shame for black people. These stories lead to a black identity unblemished by double-consciousness. These stories lead to a strong black culture.

The Reader's Role in Revision of Recorded History

The reclamation of slavery's historical narrative is difficult because it is traumatic. Trauma victims fear the pain associated with their traumatic memories and do not want to think about them. Morrison shows this reluctance to examine the past in *Beloved*. Sethe does not want to reflect on the abuses she endured under slavery because they are shameful. When Paul D pries into her past, Sethe can merely cryptically say that "they took my milk" and that she has a tree on her back (17). Paul D does not want to think about his experience of being sodomized. He can only equate his emotions to a rooster and even then cannot finish his comparison. Likewise, the legacy of slavery scares Denver. Once she learns of her mother's past actions under the slavery system, "she went deaf" and silent for two years (105) instead of confronting what her mother did. Ultimately, the words and stories of slavery are hidden "in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (72-73) because the past is too traumatic to contemplate. So, how can Morrison access these traumatic stories in order to rewrite slavery's story?

To overcome trauma, psychotherapy demands that remembering and telling trauma must be a social act. Psychotherapists like Judith Herman argue that victims cannot face trauma alone, and that recovery is possible only "within the context of relationship" (22). Trauma victims need sympathetic, committed listeners to reassure victims that it is safe to access painful memories. Listeners act like a shield, protecting the traumatized from losing themselves in their painful past and allowing victims to view

their memories. A witness acts as a “blank screen” and becomes a place in which the victims can project their traumas, which provides much needed distance for the victims to safely examine their traumas. Witnesses prevent traumatic recall from being simply “unassimilated reenactments” by providing space for the victim “to stop to hear-and listen-to himself” (Kancades 94).

Morrison shows the importance of the listener in converting traumatic memory into a narrative form. Beloved, as listener, gives Denver the ability to reflect and retell her birth story. Beloved creates emotional distance between Denver and her traumas so Denver finally is able “to see what she was saying and not just to hear it . . . Denver was seeing it now and feeling it-through Beloved. . . . The[ir] monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay together . . . [for] Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was” (91-92). Denver transforms her traumatic birth story of loneliness and death into a redemptive narrative memory of salvation and life. In the traumatic version, the story focuses on Amy and her desire to go to Boston to obtain velvet. The new story focuses on Sethe, the bond between Amy and Sethe, and the birth of Denver. Amy is transformed from the “raggediest looking trash you ever saw” (38) to a capable women with “strong hands” and “no meanness around her mouth” (90). In the new narrative, Sethe’s mark of oppression, the scarred “tree” on her back, is healed because Amy places spider webs on it and drains its pus. The new story explores Denver’s actual birth. Through having a listener, Denver is able to analyze, transform, and finally tell the story.

The listener-witness is the crucial link that allows victims to understand their traumas. But ultimately Paul D, or Denver, or even Beloved cannot be witnesses to each other's traumatic stories because they themselves are too traumatized to be impartial listeners. At first, Paul D seems to help Sethe understand her trauma because "now there was someone to share it, and he had beat the spirit away the very day he entered her house and no sign of it since" (112-13). Yet Paul D, due to his traumatic baggage, "brought [in its place] another kind of haunting: Halle's face smeared with butter and the clabber too" (113). Paul D is an imperfect listener-witness for Sethe because "[e]ven with Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least with a measure of calm, the hurt was always there" (69). Additionally, since trauma victims suffer from being pulled in different directions--wanting to remember and wanting to forget--they cannot be witnesses because they may persuade the victims to suppress their painful memories. Characters like Paul D cannot testify to the infanticide because they are unwilling to remember the act, describe the incident, or name the murder. They can only refer to the murder indirectly, never naming the violent, bloody act, so they cannot be witnesses. They cannot imagine Sethe's viewpoint. They can only judge her: "'What you did was wrong, Sethe . . . You got two feet, Sethe, not four'" (194). So, if none of the traumatized black characters is capable of being witnesses, and none of the racist white characters is willing to be a witness, then who are the witnesses to this story? Who will listen as the black characters try to overcome their traumatic pasts?

Trauma fiction reworks the relationship between reader and text by creating "a community of witnesses which implicitly includes the reader, so that the very act of

reading comprises a mode of bearing witness” (Kancandes 8). Narrative fragmentation, a traumatic fiction technique, creates gaps in a story, and the gaps call “for witnesses’ reply of interpreting them as such” (111). Gaps, which invite the readers to enter the narrative, transform readers into listeners. Morrison uses fragmentation in *Beloved*. The novel focuses on Sethe’s story, yet, at crucial dramatic junctures and around the most painful parts, narrative obstacles arise in the text because it abandons Sethe’s views. The infanticide is never witnessed directly so the fragments in the infanticide story create gaps that invite listeners to enter.

A survey of the critical commentary on the novel shows that the infanticide scene successfully draws in readers. Critics continually argue over this scene: should readers see the act as a desperate but heroic act of maternal love? Or should they see it as an act of “mis-love” (Rhodes 89)? Some critics argue that the murder is “morally reprehensible and monstrous” (Otten 86) while others believe readers cannot “easily condemn Sethe’s action” (Harris 171). Jean Wyatt claims that the narrative “withholds judgment on Sethe’s acts and persuades readers to the same” (476), while Carol Schmuddle argues that “[j]udging Sethe’s action in all its stark extremity is in fact the crux of *Beloved*” (123). The fact that critics continuously judge or justify the infanticide shows “the power of Morrison’s narrative to involve readers in the shame-and-blame drama that it stages” (Bousan 134). This debate locks the audience “‘into participation’ by the moral question raised by the novel[.] [R]eaders are encouraged to ask themselves, ‘Is Sethe right to kill Beloved? . . . Are some conditions of life worse than death’?” (147). The infanticide challenges its readers, philosophically, intellectually, and mentally.

Yet there is an inherent danger in the traumatic victim/listener relationship because the listener has the power to suppress the victims' story. Listeners, if they judge the trauma victim, have the ability to distort the victim's story by superimposing the listeners' views on that story. While empathy is important to understanding trauma victims, identification, which recreates the character in the audience's own image, dismisses the traumatic victim's "otherness." Identification forces the victim under a veil, or a double-consciousness, which then enforces more trauma and shame onto them. Morrison is in a precarious situation because she believes that "regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white" (*Playing in the Dark* xii), and white society has historically defined and told the black story. Morrison must strike a delicate balance: the witness must listen sympathetically but "resist rendering [the experience] too familiar" (Whitehead 7-8).

By destroying the typical reader/character binary, Morrison creates empathy while preventing over-identification. Usually, in this relationship, the reader is the omniscient entity who defines the character's story. Morrison disrupts this relationship by denying clues to interpret *Beloved*, making this character ambiguous and ultimately indefinable, which hinders a reader's interpretation of her novel. Critics ponder who or what *Beloved* actually is: is *Beloved* Sethe's dead baby who comes back for revenge, a slave girl who is sexually abused, the legacy of slavery that haunts everyone, a manifestation of Denver's damaged psyche, or even a figment of the town's imagination? If *Beloved* is in fact a ghost, is she Sethe's ghost, the town's ghost, or even the reader's ghost? Critics even argue over the benevolence or malevolence of *Beloved*'s motives and actions because the

consequences of Beloved's visit are unclear. Beloved, on the one hand, spreads pain to the people at 124, driving out Paul D and almost killing Sethe. On the other hand, she heals everyone's psyches by re-opening history so the characters can face their painful pasts and learn to live with them.

Through her ambiguity, Beloved is able to create a role reversal between reader and character. Readers want to fill in the gaps in the narrative, yet "the more the reader fills in the gaps, the more conscious s/he becomes that other possible explanations may exist" (Osagie 436). Critics cannot agree on any standard interpretation and consequently cannot overpower the narrative. Instead, critics like Krumholz surrender their power over the narrative, claiming that Beloved is "a character too complex to be cataloged and contained" (115). Osagie agrees: "Our attempts at defining Beloved are always superseded by our knowledge of what she might not be or, more precisely, what else she may be" (435). Readers are rendered passive because they have lost power over the narrative and must simply listen, so characters are able to "articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside" (Kancades 96).

Morrison prevents readers from over-identifying with the characters, but she needs to create "listeners" of the readers. She does this by simulating the slavery experience for her readers. Morrison uses the baby ghost, who was "spiteful [and] [f]ull of Baby's venom" (1), to "assault[s] her readers' assumptions about reality" (430). Morrison's ghost is strange to the reader because it is a baby and it really exists. The reader thinks that "[t]his book isn't behaving right" (429) so the "readers lose their

bearings” (428). Morrison admits she wants her readers to feel confusion, acknowledging that:

The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel’s population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense. No lobby, no door, no entrance-a gangplank, perhaps (but a very short one). And the house into which this snatching-this kidnapping-propels one, changes from spiteful to loud to quiet, as the sounds in the body of the ship itself may have changed. (“A Bench by the Road” 45)

Morrison also creates a sense of confusion through *Beloved*, as discussed in the previous paragraphs. Listeners connect to the black characters because they experience bewilderment, confusion, and helplessness, feelings that are comparable to slave’s experience during the Middle Passage.

Morrison creates an environment conducive for her readers to act as listeners, allowing traumatic characters to access their memories. In section twenty of the novel, Sethe seems to be talking to *Beloved*, but that is not possible for she constantly refers to *Beloved* in the third person: “*Beloved*, she is my daughter” (236). She must be talking to someone else. Because there is no one physically present in the book, she must be talking to the reader. As witnesses, the readers allow Sethe to process her traumas, admitting that “[t]his is the first time I’m telling it” (228). She contemplates them at length and starts to understand her own feelings and fears. Sethe describes her devastation at overhearing schoolteacher define her as an animal. She remembers her rape, her beating, her escape, and her heart-wrenching choice to send her children ahead in order to try to find Halle.

She talks about her lost childhood, how ““I wanted to be [a daughter] and would have been if my ma’am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one”” (240). She reflects on the pain of realizing that her mother may have tried to run away without her, acknowledging that her mother probably planned to abandon her. She confesses that she almost becomes a prostitute. She admits to suicidal thoughts: ““When I put that headstone up I wanted to lay in there . . . and I would have if my Buglar and Howard and Denver didn’t need me, because my mind was homeless then”” (241).

Other traumatized characters also are able to analyze their pasts with the reader’s help. After the chapter devoted exclusively to Sethe’s thoughts, Denver explores her own traumatized past. Again, while it seems that Denver is speaking to Beloved, she refers to Beloved in the third person, and since no one is physically present, she must be addressing the readers. For the first time, she describes her loneliness and admits that she fears her mother because ““I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared of her because of it”” (242). She is able to explain why she is afraid of the outside world: whatever forced Sethe to kill her one daughter is out there ““[s]o I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can’t happen again and my mother won’t have to kill me too”” (242).

Finally Beloved speaks and tells the readers of the pain of the Middle Passage. She remembers her sense of confusion, helplessness, and fear. She describes the sense of devastation and the prevalence of death. She remembers the piles of dead bodies. She remembers the death of her mother and her resulting abandonment issues, how ““there is

no one to want me to say me my name” (251), and how she is now ““alone”” (252).

Even Paul D tells the reader his tale, his memory of running away and his experience of watching schoolteacher and his nephews shoot Sixo. He talks about how he thought he knew his value as a person until “he discovered his worth” as merely a slave (267). He remembers the manner in which schoolteacher dehumanized him by putting “a three-spoke collar on him so he can’t lie down and they chain his ankles together” (268).

The characters are able to access their trauma because of their relationship with the reader/listener. The baby ghost and Beloved create a disoriented reader. Trauma can then be transferred to the reader, providing the distance for characters to reflect on their pasts. Because characters can remember their painful pasts, they can rework them to tell them from their own personal perspective.

Language as a Racist Discourse

Even though black characters feel safe to access their traumatic memories and analyze them, language is problematic for them and prevents the verbalization of a black story. There is no “black language,” only a racist western language that literally defines black as negation to white. Morrison knows that she cannot “escape from racially inflicted language” (*Playing in the Dark* 12-13) so “I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority” (x-xi). She acknowledges this lack of language in *Beloved*: African-Americans have forgotten their language, “the same language her ma’am spoke, and which would never come back” (62). This loss renders them seemingly incapable of expressing their stories because the dominant, western language, a language in which slaves like Sethe can “recognize only seventy-five printed words” (161), has “no future in it” for blacks (30). Paul D. laments that he cannot adequately explain his experience of slavery and imprisonment, that “I just ain’t sure I can say it” (85) because of this lack of language.

Traumatic fiction, which is a “valuable venue for politically and socially marginalized witnesses” (Vickroy 5), allows Morrison to tell a story from the viewpoint of the Other. Traumatic fiction distorts white, western, conventional narrative structures by incorporating literary techniques like fragmentation, a blend of genres and styles, “textual gaps (in page layout and content), repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and a focus on visual images and affective states” (Vickroy 29). These

techniques mirror and consequently express traumatic experiences. The subversion of the traditional white narrative opens up room to present marginalized experiences that have been historically suppressed by the dominant culture.

Lines Viewed Through a Traumatic Fiction Lens

The introductory lines of this essay—the lines identified as jazzthetic—take on new and significant meaning when viewed through the lens of traumatic fiction. Here is the excerpt, extended to provide a clearer picture of the trauma exhibited in it, and the techniques incorporated here are indicative of the narrative strategies of the whole novel:

‘Tell me the truth. Didn’t you come from the other side?
Yes. I was on the other side . . .

She said you wouldn’t hurt me.
She hurt me.
I will protect you.
I want her face
Don’t love her too much.
I am loving her too much.
Beloved
You are my sister
You are my daughter
You are my face; you are me
I have found you again; you have come back to me

You are my Beloved
You are mine
You are mine
You are mine . . .

I will never leave you again
Don’t ever leave me again
You will never leave me again
You went into the water
I drank your blood . . .
You hurt me . . .

You are mine’ (255-56)

The excerpt above contains repeated phrases like ““You are mine,”” which constantly interrupts the development of the conversation. The characters express recurring ideas of leaving, pain, and death, traumas that dominate their lives. Repetition in plot, language, and imagery mirrors the effects of trauma. The traumatized mind grasps a particular moment, “preventing it from slipping back into its proper chronological place in the past” (Caruth 185) so a person is forced to relive traumatic events in “the inherent endless necessity of repetition.” Repetition in the narrative mirrors this traumatic recall, which remains fixed and closed to creative interpretation because a person cannot comprehend and consequently incorporate this event into his/her “narrative memories” to create a completed story of his/her past.

The excerpt is typical of the repetitious nature of the narrative. The three sections of the story begin with the same phrase: “124 was . . .” in turn “spiteful” (3), “loud” (200), and “quiet” (281). Two consecutive chapters begin with ““I am Beloved and she is mine”” (248+253), which continuously brings the trauma surrounding Beloved to the forefront of the story, stopping the momentum of the story and the development of the narrative. Sethe hates her “terrible memory” because:

[u]nfortunately her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field, running practically, to get to the pump quickly and rinse the chamomile sap from he legs. Nothing else in her mind . . . Nothing . . . Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them . . . and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes. (6-7)

Seeing a tree, meeting Paul D, or hearing about diamonds transports Sethe back to Sweet Home to relive her rape, her beating, and her escape. By reenacting those events she

attempts to comprehend what happened there and to understand her actions. Sethe's "brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day" (83). When Sethe smells the scent of burnt hair, she loses emotional control and begins to fold wet laundry because "[s]he had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind" (73). That sensation transports Sethe back to her childhood to witness again the lynching of her mother. That is why, for Sethe, "[w]here I was before I came here [to Bluestone], that place is real. It's never going away" (43). Sethe reveals how one traumatic event can eclipse her memory and existence. She finds time "so hard for me to believe in it [because] [s]ome things go. Pass on. Some things just stay . . . Some things you forget. Other things you never do" (43).

Morrison's novel demonstrates, as Whitehead explains, that a person does not control traumatic recall, but instead is "haunted" by it. Any person or event may set off these traumatic memories, which taint all other experiences. Consequently, the ghost figure is the perfect symbol in contemporary literature to represent trauma, for a ghost "represents an appropriate embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of past in the present" (Whitehead 6). Caruth argues that modern writers reconfigure the ghost story to examine trauma as psychological "possession" for "[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4-5).

Morrison shows that Sethe is tormented by her traumatic past by having her literally haunted by a ghost. Morrison opens her novel by describing a "spiteful" ghost

(3), who drives Sethe's two sons away, hurts her dog named Here Boy, and scares the community. Since Sethe's past is painful, it is a sad ghost, so sad that "[w]alking through it, a wave of grief soaked [Paul D] so thoroughly he wanted to cry" (9). When events and people stimulate Sethe's traumatic memories of Sweet Home and her gruesome past, they aggravate the ghost. Paul D, who galvanizes Sethe's memories of Sweet Home, angers the ghost, causing it to become violent and shake the whole house. That is why Sethe "knew Paul D was adding . . . to her life . . . old rememories that broke her heart" (112). When Sethe, Denver, and Paul D go to the carnival, it is an extremely emotional experience for Sethe because for the first time she can focus on the future: she realizes that there is potential to create a family, in which "Denver was swaying with delight" and "the shadow of three people still held hands" (59). Sethe's emotions call forth Beloved. Beloved emerges fully clothed out of the water and lies on a stump near Bluestone to be discovered by Sethe. Beloved, a ghost figure "from the other side" (254), constantly reminds Sethe of her past. Her questions, whether they be about diamonds in Seth's ears or the reasons Sethe murdered her daughter, transport Sethe back to Sweet Home to relive her trauma.

This ghost represents the pain and sadness of Sethe's past. But how can Denver be haunted by this same ghost if it is Sethe's traumatic memory? Whitehead explains that the ghost figure can represent the pain that is transmitted from one generation to the next. Morrison shows that the legacy of slavery still damages: Denver, who lives her life in freedom, suffers from the legacy of slavery. As a baby, she drinks the bloody milk from her mother's breast, so she shares in her mother's shame from slavery; she suffers greatly

because she also “has no self” (123). The ghost, Sethe’s murdered daughter, spends every minute by Sethe *and* Denver, illustrating that Sethe cannot escape her traumatic memory and that Denver suffers from her mother’s past. That is why Sethe warns Denver of Sweet Home, for “[t]he picture [of Sweet Home] is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you” (43-44). Sethe desperately wants to protect Denver from this trauma, “for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered” (51). That is why Denver becomes obsessed with the ghost once she learns that Sethe murdered her daughter. The ghost “held for her all the anger, love, and fear she didn’t know what to do with” (121).

Sethe and Denver are not the only ones haunted by their traumatic pasts. Morrison explains that all black people have traumatic pasts, or ghosts, that they must work through. When Sethe considers moving, Baby Suggs asks ““What’d be the point”” for ““[n]ot a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief”” (6). Paul D must come to terms with the inferiority complex brought on by the chains of slavery and prison. Denver must come to terms with the intergenerational shame she carries because of her mother’s actions. Ella must justify the act of murdering babies.

Morrison uses repetition and the ghost figure to show how slavery and its legacy still loom over black people. Repetition shows that trauma may be understood as the tyranny of the past, one horrific event that dominates all other experiences. The ghost represents the pervasiveness of slavery’s legacy because it has not been addressed

adequately; it still “haunts” the black community and traumatizes them. Morrison’s use of repetition and a ghost shows that African Americans are chained to the past, that they have not dissociated themselves from slavery in either their own minds or western cultures’ mind. Slavery’s legacy prevents the development of their identity and culture which alienates and isolates African Americans.

The traumatic fiction narrative technique of fragmentation expresses alienation. Fragmentation shatters standard chronology and linear storytelling. The narrative disintegrates, literally breaking the story into pieces and preventing a harmonious and completed story. Fragmentation expresses agitation about the material because African Americans are alienated from their own history, ancestors, and stories.

The ““You are mine”” excerpt from *Beloved* is a collection of fragments, which is indicative of the story’s incohesive narrative structure. Morrison introduces a potential story line about Sethe’s dead daughter, then refuses to continue that stream of narrative. Instead the narrative jumps around and becomes a collection of fragments about Sethe’s dead daughter. The story starts in the present with Sethe remembering the love she bears for her dead child. Immediately, the reader is thrown back eighteen years in time, when Sethe showed her love by procuring a tombstone in exchange for sex—“ten minutes for seven letters” on the tombstone (5). The memory is too painful for Sethe to reflect on for long. She finds that “those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life”; her prostitution is worse “than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil” (6). The narrative then shifts to a time when Sethe considered moving from the house. Next, Paul

D reflects on the emptiness of Sethe's eyes. The narrative shifts again to the past: schoolteacher hurt Sethe in some way. When that memory becomes too painful, the narrative jumps back to the present in which Paul D reflects on how Sethe's hair softens her face.

Beloved is ultimately a collection of fragments and this fragmented narrative represents the helplessness African Americans experience from slavery's legacy. The fragmentation expresses the alienation they feel in society and shows how painful slavery is still to them. It reveals the literal fragmentation of families and records. It reveals their inability to connect with themselves, others, society, and even to their pasts, which prevents a creation of a black historical narrative.

In the excerpt at the beginning of this section, the empty space on the page expresses African American's inability to verbalize their stories and the resulting silence that surrounds their stories. Vickroy explains that authors can visually show silence, the repression of trauma, textually through page or section breaks. Morrison incorporates empty space throughout her narrative. When Morrison cannot go further in a description or when a character can no longer think about an event, Morrison makes breaks between paragraphs to express silence. She describes Beloved's disappearance, how "the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts," then she abruptly stops, skips a line, leaving space, to simply say "[i]t was not a story to pass on" (322).

Additionally, traumatic fiction authors express silence through the characters' reluctance to explore their pasts. Silence surrounds the excerpt at the beginning of this

section. No character can emphatically say that Sethe murdered her daughter. Instead, they address the act indirectly, saying “I drank your blood” and “You hurt me.” This excerpt is indicative of the silence in the whole narrative. Every character hesitates to tell his/her story, and this hesitation shows each person’s wish to simply forget his/her traumatic past. Sethe has “no words . . . no words at all” after she kills her daughter (179). She is quiet about her past because “every mention of her past life hurts. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable” (69). Sethe constantly stops mid story because she does not want to “go inside” (55); she would slowly blink her eyes, slide her bottom lip over her top, flare her nostrils, “signs that Sethe had reached the point beyond which she would not go” (45). Denver, and the audience, knows that “[h]er mother had secrets-things she wouldn’t tell; things she halfway told” (45), yet “to Denver’s inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries” (69). Sethe tells Paul D that schoolteacher found her and her family, but that “I wasn’t going back there. I don’t care who found who. Any life but that one. I went to jail instead” (50). She does not explain how she convinced schoolteacher not to re-enslave her or why she went to jail. She does not tell the audience why she has not been on a social outing for eighteen years or why the community hates her. Sethe constantly brings up the pink headstone she “bought” for her dead baby. But she does not tell the readers what happened to her baby or why she needs to answer “one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust” (5). She does not tell the audience why “Sethe blamed herself for Baby’s Suggs’ collapse” or why “Sethe knew the grief at 124 started when she jumped down the wagon, her newborn tied to her chest in the underwear of a white girl looking for Boston” (105). When Sethe actually tries to tell

Paul D about it, she can only “circle” around the subject, talking about how proud she was about escaping with all four of her children without Halle’s help and how her children are her best parts. “Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn’t get it right off-she could never explain” (192). She can merely say that she put them in a place ““where they would be safe”” (192).

Morrison uses silence to mirror what she regards as a “national amnesia” about slavery and the traumatic effects of its legacy (“The Pain of Being Black” 257). The silence makes the reader aware that there has been much oppression and repression of this subject. This silence illustrates that there is more to the historical narrative of slavery, that many voices have not been heard. It then encourages readers to listen to those silenced voices in order to gain a fuller, more accurate picture of slavery. Morrison cannot tell every slave’s story, but by incorporating silence into her narrative, she makes her audience aware that there are other stories besides the “official” narrative.

Morrison uses the traumatic fiction technique of multiple and changing narrative position to show the multi-dimensional story of slavery. In this excerpt, the viewpoints shift from Beloved, to Denver, to Sethe, and perhaps to others. For example, Denver would perhaps say ““Don’t love her too much”” but that line is reminiscent of what Paul D says about Seth’s love being too “thick.” Paul D, however, is not there. It becomes unclear who is speaking the last lines.

Morrison constantly shifts her subject and viewpoints. These continuous, random changes are not flashbacks of someone remembering their youth but examples of the Traumatic fiction technique. Chapter 1 ends with Denver “slowly, methodically, miserably” (23) eating bread covered with jelly. Chapter 2 begins with the repetition of “not quite in a hurry” (24), as Paul D and Sethe climb the stairs, and ends with Sethe and Halle having sex in the cornfields while the other men on Sweet Home enjoy the sweet corn that falls due to Sethe and Halle’s rendezvous. Chapter 2 ends with Paul D’s reminisce about eating corn, remembering how sweet it tastes. Chapter 3 begins with Denver’s “sweet” secrets (34). Later in the story, Morrison describes that same event at the end of Chapter 2 from Sethe’s viewpoint, who remembers smelling Paul D roasting the ears of corn when she was making love to Halle. The narrative threads are connected through associative logic. This shifting narrative perspective continues throughout the story. Sethe describes the crystals Mrs. Garner gave her for her marriage, the “shiny diamonds” she wore in her ears, and the next chapter begins with Paul D noticing how “shiny” Beloved is (78). As she listens to Paul D singing outside, Sethe thinks about how Paul D’s arrival makes Bluestone seem drab— “[t]hings became what they were: drabness looked drab; heat was hot” (48). Once the song is over, the viewpoint shifts to Paul D’s, and he thinks that his arrival at Bluestone shows that “the rest of the world was bald” (49).

The narrative slides from Sethe’s viewpoint to Paul D’s, to Denver’s, and even to that of an omniscient narrator. The narrative form constantly changes from omniscient narrative to internal monologue to third-person narration. Morrison uses different

subjects and voices to reconstruct a history previously closed to interpretation because of racial reasons. She focuses on individual witnesses, “foregrounding their voices and individual experiences within re-created traumatic contexts in order to bring forth what has lost its immediacy in historical analysis” (174). The shifts allow Morrison to analyze events from various viewpoints and see them in different lights. The numerous and varied subjectivities show that slavery is multifaceted and cannot be captured in one “official” historical account. The different subjects allow her to reveal the falsity of the homogeneous historical account and analyze slavery from many views, providing a more complex, truer story that keeps this historical account open to other voices.

Since traumatic characters cannot tell their stories directly, for they lack a language, they must use indirect references to express their pain. “Trauma writers make the suffering body the small, focused universe of the tormented and a vehicle for rendering unimaginable experience tangible to readers” (Caruth 32-33). To tell their stories the characters use association, visual images that represent their traumas and express their pain. In the excerpt above, Sethe states that she “‘drank your blood,’” a vivid imagery, to describe how she murdered her daughter. Sethe describes schoolteacher and the ink she made him to represent the dehumanizing experiences of slavery and rape. Paul D cites a rooster to describe his destruction of manhood when he had a bit in his mouth. When Sethe finally describes the murder of her daughter, she compares her actions to those of hummingbirds; when she saw schoolteacher’s hat, “she heard wings. Little hummingbirds struck their needle beaks right through anything . . . She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were parts that were

precious and beautiful and fine” (192). Morrison constantly refers to Sweet Home’s trees, describing their beauty and their underlying horror. “When [Sethe’s] dreams roamed outside 124, anywhere they wished, she saw them sometimes in the beautiful trees, their little legs barely visible in the leaves” (47). Trees express pain the characters endured at Sweet Home. It reminds Sethe of the lynching she was forced to watch. It reminds Sethe of her rape because the nephews molested her under Sweet Home’s trees. That is why Sethe is disgusted with any tree sap on her leg and is “fixed on getting every last bit of sap off” (7), for the chamomile sap on her legs transports her back to Sweet Home and to her rape. The sap reminds her of nephew’s milky semen. Sethe’s gnarled scar is in the shape of a tree, a constant reminder of the brutality she endured. This tree represents rape, beating, and dehumanization.

These images capture the violence of slavery and show how deeply slavery’s legacy affects black people. In *Beloved*, typically life-affirming images like breastfeeding and trees are transformed by slavery into oppressive images of shame, oppression, rape, and death. The warped meanings of the images reveal the trauma slaves endured under slavery by showing slavery’s ability to alter black people’s perception, and consequently their reality.

Freud describes trauma as a wound that wants to “tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth 4). Morrison reveals those wounds, traumatic experiences of slavery for black people, yet cultural imperialism established by racist canonical literature still favors a white perception of slavery. Morrison uses intertextuality to respond to the master narrative, the homogeneous viewpoint, “the ideological script that the Western world imposes on ‘others’” (Jones

615), to establish a black viewpoint in the literary and historical tradition. She references canonical texts to enter into a critical dialogue to rework the meaning of the incorporated texts. By opening up canonical literature to interpretation, a “minority writer . . . may emphasize a meaning or an implication of a myth . . . [that the myth] refuses to consider, and may signify the original meaning into the background, giving primary authority to the signification over the master’s trope” (Jones 615). Morrison provides an alternative perspective to familiar texts, which allows previously silenced voices to articulate their own stories and “bear witness to their former historical and cultural exclusion” (91).

Morrison specifically incorporates Biblical stories because the Bible is western civilization’s prevalent myth of creation and the source of white men’s origins and domination. Morrison deliberately incorporates into her novel many biblical stories but alters their narrative perspective, challenging the primacy of one “true” story to the exclusion of all others. Morrison highlights the novel’s connection to the Bible through the name *Beloved*. The name of the novel and its titled character refer to Romans 9:25, which she makes clear with the introductory quotation:

*I will call them my people,
which were not my people
and her beloved,
which was not beloved.*

Throughout the book, Morrison reworks the Genesis stories, altering them to establish an African American story that expresses the realities of black origins in America. Instead of mirroring her story on the Bible’s Adam and Eve story, Morrison challenges the messages of that story by upholding the Lilith myth of human creation.

The Lilith story portrays Eden as a jail. Adam tries to rule Lilith, but she claims equality because she is made out of dirt like Adam is. Because Adam tries to force her to obey him, Lilith flees Eden. God sends three angels to capture her, and when they do, she refuses to return and declares that she would henceforth live by the Red Sea to produce and kill hundreds of demon children every day. Morrison establishes that Sethe is a Lilith character when Sethe flees from Sweet Home. “Four. Riding close together, bunched-up like, and righteous” (157) chase Sethe, a chase reminiscent of Lilith’s escape. Like Lilith, Sethe is able to escape their clutches through the drastic means of murdering her child. Morrison’s new creation story shows that slavery was not the Eden slave supporters claimed it to be. The “Gods” of this “Eden,” Mr. Garner and schoolteacher, oppress the slaves by keeping them ignorant and imposing their values on the slaves. Sweet Home is a prison. Sethe must “bring a fistful of salsify into Mrs. Garner’s kitchen every day just to be able to work in it” (27) because she feels that her existence and work there is “ugly” (27).

Morrison also subverts the meaning of the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis. In the original story, God forbids any human to touch its fruit, but Adam and Eve desire the tree’s fruit because they will become godlike in their knowledge. In *Beloved*, Sethe has no desire for this tree. Instead, the god of Sweet Home, schoolteacher, inscribes that tree onto Sethe’s back by whipping her. Instead of becoming godlike, Sethe gains the knowledge that she is inferior. Through the tree, schoolteacher teaches Sethe submission and inferiority. Morrison perverts the tree, a representation of omniscient knowledge, into a symbol of obedience; additionally, she transforms the snake, the epitome of evil,

into a symbol of rebirth. In the Genesis account, the serpent is a villain, tricking Eve, and consequently Adam, into eating from the Tree of Knowledge. In *Beloved*, though, the snake is a redemptive figure, allowing the slaves to act. The deceitfulness associated with the snake is a lifesaving attribute for the slaves. Sixo and his thirty-mile woman are able to make love through the fiction of the snakebite. “For Sixo and his lover, their own fiction of the snake enables their lovemaking, and therefore the snake becomes associated with beauty and empowerment” (Stave 54).

Morrison builds her narrative around an important biblical theme in the Old Testament: the sacrifice of a child. According to Genesis, because of Abraham’s faith, God gives him a son: Isaac. Abraham loves his son greatly, but God tests Abraham’s faith and demands that Abraham sacrifice Isaac. Once Abraham proves his loyalty, God prevents Abraham from murdering his son. The story illustrates that every creation belongs to God. Morrison uses this story to challenge schoolteacher’s claim that he owns slaves’ bodies. Schoolteacher parallels the Old Testament God because he believes that a portion of humanity belongs to him, that they are his property. When schoolteacher finds the runaway slaves at Bluestone, Sethe gathers “all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful” (192), her children, and sacrifices her daughter to prove that they do not belong to schoolteacher. In defiance of slavery’s notion that black children belong to white slave owners, Sethe claims that ““Beloved, she my daughter. She mine”” (236). Morrison defends Sethe’s argument of autonomy. Ultimately, Sethe’s sacrifice saves her family. Her actions convince schoolteacher “that there was nothing there to claim. The three . . . pickaninies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed,

were not” (175-76). Schoolteacher believes that “[t]he whole lot was lost now” (176) and does not re-enslave them. Even though it seem to Paul D that her actions ““didn’t work”” because ““[y]our boys gone you don’t know where . . . the other won’t leave the yard,”” Sethe believes that at least the children ““ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em”” (194). Her belief in her own autonomy, her “thick” love (193), saves her children from the abuses she endured in slavery.

Intertextuality allows Morrison to critique the white perception of slavery by revealing the black perspective of that institution. It also permits her to create a narrative to emphasize the community, which “offers a cushion for pain” (Erickson 188) to traumatized people. Morrison reworks the Genesis flood story to uphold black community. According to the legend, God, upset over the sins of humanity, plans to destroy it. He is pleased with righteous Noah, so he tells Noah to build an ark and save his family and two of every animal. Noah survives and receives a covenant from God. In the Bible, God is all powerful and only He can save. Noah, who is passive, simply listens to God for orders. Noah only saves himself and his kin. Morrison advocates a “process of decolonization that is communal rather than isolated and individualized” (Elliott 198). In her flood story, African Americans are prisoners of their society, oppressed and abused. The prisoners feel that “[l]ife was dead” (109) until it rains for over nine days. The prisoners are in danger because they are locked in cells that will collapse due to the weight of the mud. Paul D believes that he will be crushed “like a rick bug” (110). Whereas in the Noah story, the flood is deadly, in *Beloved*, the flood saves by teaching African Americans to rely on each other. Since the prisoners are connected together,

“[t]he chain that held them would save all or none” (110); their fates are intertwined, so either everyone survives or everyone dies. The group of men must work together “[f]or one lost, all lost” (110). The connection that unites their destinies provides a means of salvation: they use the chain as a means of communication as they safely tunnel their way out of the prison cells. Morrison transforms the image of the chain, an icon of oppression for slaves, into an image of community strength for African Americans.

Morrison re-images the New Testament story called “The Wedding at Cana” in John to stress the importance of community to black people because “Trauma narratives . . . explore the limits of the Western myth of the highly individuated subject” (Vickroy2). In the Bible story, Jesus attends a wedding feast, but the wine runs out early, so Mary, his mother, asks Jesus to alleviate the problem. Jesus acts independently and converts jugs of water into wine. The wine steward stresses the high quality of the beverage, and the crowd gratefully relies on Jesus for this miracle. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs throws a celebration for Sethe’s homecoming, and like Jesus’ miracle conversation, Baby Suggs acts independently and her “three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve). Sethe’s two hens became five turkeys. The one block of ice brought all the way from Cincinnati—over which they poured mashed watermelon mixed with sugar and mint to make punch—became a wagonload of ice cakes for a washtub of strawberry shrug” (137).

Baby Suggs disregards the community. She angers the partygoers because they believe that the feast is “too much” (137); Baby Suggs “had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess” (138). The Bluestone community is angry at Baby Sugg’s

“uncalled-for pride” (137) in attempting to reduce people to childlike dependency and not molding a self-sufficient community. The community asks “[w]hy is she and hers always the center of things? Giving advice; passing messages, healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone” (137). Baby Suggs is “elevating herself above others and thus viewing them with contempt” (Bousman 144). Baby Suggs’ actions disconnect her from the community. Because Baby Suggs separates herself from the Bluestone community, they do not warn her when slave-catchers approach her house, leading to the infanticide. *Beloved* stresses communal, not individual, power because “[a]s Morrison’s novel demonstrates, individual protest is potentially self-destructive, and only communal protest is capable of subverting symbolic structures. Only collective action leads to freedom” (Parker 11).

Morrison reworks both the Flood and the Wedding at Cana stories to show that black identity must rely on a sense of community, for community “serves as the repository for binding traditions” (Erickson 188) and provides crucial support for the black culture to overcome its traumatic past. Baby Shruggs commands that fellow black people create a community to love each other’s bodies because American society does not appreciate their blackness:

Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they so not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hand! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!*

. . . More than you life-holding womb and you life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (89)

In the end, the community saves Sethe from her past. They stand together, pray together, and sing together to exorcise Beloved and the traumatic past. That is why Sethe believes that the ultimate happiness is “to belong to a community of other free Negroes-to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed” (177). Morrison shows that the community allows African Americans to claim their own stories and identities. The community teaches black people to love their own selves and own culture. From the community’s example, Paul D learns to understand Sethe’s story and to see her for who she really is, realizing “You your best thing, Sethe” (273). He wants to “put his story next to hers” (273). All black people must learn to place their stories together to create a black literary narrative that explains their past and culture. All black people stories together will create a strong black identity.

Coda

Traumatic fiction narrative techniques, which explain the presence of a ghost figure, the lack of chronological narrative, and the repetition of words and images, allow Morrison to tell a black historical account of slavery more aligned with slaves' experiences. Traumatic narrative techniques allow Morrison to express society's silencing of the true nature of slavery, the inability to fit slavery into one official story, the pervasiveness of slavery's influence on today's society, and its disastrous legacy for black people. These techniques verbalize the traumas of the past, transforms the past into a story and this "transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and other's past, may lose the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall" (Caruth 153).

Critics like Lars Eckstein, Peter J. Capuano, and Joanna Wolfe are mistaken: the musical qualities of the writing do not show that *Beloved* is simply a type of song that should be replayed. Morrison repeatedly stresses that *Beloved* is "not a story to pass on" (324) so she does not want the same story to be told about slavery. Morrison's desire to not repeat this story only makes sense when viewed through the lens of traumatic fiction. Traumatic memory is inflexible and does not allow new versions of a story. A sign that trauma loses its power, a sign that a victim is cured of his or her trauma, is that a person can tell a slightly different version of the event, adding or subtracting details, to other people. This ability to rework a story shows that the memory is no longer traumatic.

Since *Beloved* expresses and works through traumatic memory, Morrison hopes that new stories will arise from black cultural memory indicating control over the memory.

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