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## **Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

### **Feminine Mystiques**

Since its publication in 1987, this novel by Morrison has spurred an enormous wave of critical responses and interpretations. Undoubtedly, the most challenging aspect to any critic is the fact that *Beloved* rigorously defies hermeneutic foreclosures. I choose to read the novel as a key text which throws light upon liminal psychic experiences by using psychoanalysis and especially Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, as well as the narratological approach of Bakhtin. Morrison deals with the problem of human survival on two levels, thus bridging the gap between historical narrative and personal history. One of these levels is the level on which the author makes a subversive record of the history of survival-in-suffering, and relates the communal history. The second level is the level of depiction of survival in the history-of-suffering, that is, each individual's history. Through analysis of the issues of language, memory, trauma, and the unconscious I will try to show how memory and trauma are both personal and communal, and how they shape – through language – the psychohistory of the individual.

Despite its effort to tell objectively the story of humankind through an account of events and facts, history seems to fail in passing on adequately the story of human suffering. Since suffering is ultimately a subjective experience, which means having more to do with the realm of the psychological, rather than the factological, it is very difficult to frame that experience in a linear narrative. A mother's voice can often speak about that experience: a voice deformed *through* and *in* suffering, transformed into the primal howl of a lawless, chaotic pre-Oedipal state, and tuned into the core of suffering.

By encoding black women's individual voices telling the story of the unspeakable history of slavery in America, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* bridges the hiatus between purely historical representations of facts and the representations of horrible psychological traumas and suffering. Since its publication in 1987, Morrison's fifth, Pulitzer Prize winning novel has caused an enormous wave of critical responses and

interpretations.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, the most challenging aspect to any critic is the fact that the book defies hermeneutic foreclosures and remains generously open to various interpretations and critical approaches. The only perspective that the novel does not accommodate, however, is the facile canonical interpretation of *Beloved* simply as a fictional record of slavery and reconstruction of historical facts, because the novel is undoubtedly much more than that. The book throws light upon liminal psychic experiences which arrest both black men and women into the unbearable, abnormal existence under slavery even if they are already free. In other words, Morrison uses an approach that a scholar like Bhabha considers “theoretically innovative and politically crucial,” namely because she shares the need

... to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.<sup>2</sup>

Morrison is particularly interested in the depiction of such “in-between” spaces which create a possibility for the rise of a new sense of self in her characters. In *Beloved* such spaces appear in the analysis of black people’s experiences in the epoch of slavery and immediately after the Civil War (1861–1865), when the abolition of slavery is officially proclaimed countrywide, yet the social realities in the United States – predominantly in the South, but also in the North – are harshly imprinted with memories from the slave past. The central themes in *Beloved* are the meaning of community and motherhood, the reciprocity between the integrity of an ethnic group as a whole and the status of its female members, and the equally problematic construction of masculinity. In her novel Morrison pinpoints especially well the anachronistic existence of two contradictory yet interdependent political, cultural, and ethical structures: of the slaveholders and the missing ideological structures of the slaves. To articulate those cultural differences, the writer delves into the respective opposing conceptions of history and memory, reason and irrationality, time and space, property and deprivation, kinship and “otherness.” On the one hand, for the

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1. Just a few of the extremely interesting analyses published recently by scholars like Laura Doyle, Barbara Hill Rigney, Patricia McKee, Roger Luckhurst and Cynthia Hamilton, not to mention numerous dissertations and conference papers.

2. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

slaves, these concepts are embodied in the performative panpsychism of the African folklore where everything, a living creature or not, is endowed with spirituality, while on the other hand, for the slaveholders these are the monotheistic, pedagogical beliefs of the Western Enlightenment and modernity.<sup>3</sup> Thus Morrison encapsulates the significance of the clash between these two world-perceptions by an extremely eloquent novelistic performance of what Paul Gilroy will define as a “desire” to subvert the continuous “colonization” of the present:

The desire to put these cultural systems against one another arises from present conditions. In particular, it is formed by the need to indict those forms of rationality which have been rendered implausible by their racially exclusive character and further to explore the history of their complicity with terror systematically and rationally practised as a form of political and economic administration.<sup>4</sup>

Read from one personal perspective, I consider *Beloved* to be a novel about the inexorable metastasis of psychological destruction of the human soul incurred by, and proliferating in, slavery, but also surviving after the Abolition. However, the larger context of the novel calls forth the broader concept of modernity, and the vulnerability of the individual in it, and especially the vulnerability of women, which arises from the “sense of the vacuity, the inanity of the present.”<sup>5</sup> As Morrison points out, what we generally consider modern<sup>6</sup> dates well back in history; in other words, she claims that “modern life begins with slavery”:

From a women’s point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with post-modern problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago: certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. Certain kinds of madness, deliberately going mad in order, as one of the characters says in

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3. For a discussion of the “performative” and the “pedagogical” see Bhabha.

4. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 220.

5. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 4.

6. Among the many interesting titles on the problem of modernity, see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, tr. by Catherine Porter (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

the book [*Beloved*], “in order not to lose your mind.” These strategies for survival made the truly modern person. . .<sup>7</sup>

Morrison deals with the problem of human survival on two levels, thus bridging the gap between historical narrative and intersubjective story, and creating what I would call a “psychic history” of slavery. One of these is the level on which the author makes a subversive record of the history of survival-in-suffering and narrates the communal history as constructed in a linear episteme, that is, as a linear story which locates the events in *Beloved* in the late 1860s. The second level is the level of depiction of survival in the history-of-suffering, which is the individual subjective history with its combination of linear and heterochronic, or cyclic,<sup>8</sup> events. Morrison uses a highly suggestive narrative mode to structure what seems to be an/the “unstructurable” flow of the past into the present in order to successfully work on these two levels. For Morrison, there is no hierarchy between these two levels: her goals are to expose once again slavery as a paramount social evil and to divest the numerous atrocities towards slaves of their long-standing, victimizing anonymity.

My aim in this paper is to read *Beloved* also on two levels: first, from a narratological point of view, in order to show how the narrative structure of the novel accommodates Morrison’s project to create a psychic history of slavery, and secondly, from a psychoanalytic point, to analyze just one character in the novel, Sethe, in terms of the effects of her traumatic experiences and the way they mar her life after slavery as well.

## The story without

The distinction between “fabula” and “sjuzhet” made by the Russian Formalists,<sup>9</sup> or the parallel distinction, between “story” and “discourse,” as interpreted by the Structuralists,<sup>10</sup> is a useful starting point in the analysis of *Beloved*. This novel is remarka-

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7. Quoted in Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1994), p. 178.

8. The two terms are often used synonymously to refer to recurrences or dislocations in linearity. See Terdiman, for example.

9. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, tr. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). Bakhtin interprets “fabula” as a series of events, while “sjuzhet” is the story as narrated.

10. For example, in the works of Culler, Chambers, Barthes, and Todorov, “story” is understood as a sequence of actions (the text as narrated), and “discourse” is a narration of events

bly rich in complicated story lines and narrative instances, which complement each other to produce a text highly encoded in hermeneutic terms. Carden, for example, writes of “two endings” of the novel and “a triple interpretation of [the character of] *Beloved*.”<sup>11</sup> As a consequence of this intricate narrative play, we can hardly speak of a single story in *Beloved*; it is rather a text of contesting stories which operate upon the principle of “embedding” (*myse en abyme*).<sup>12</sup> What this means is that different protagonists, events, and stories come alternatively to the foreground at different points in the narration to produce concentric discursive circles, or subtexts, rather than a single clear-cut, linear story. In their functioning, the multiple subtexts evoke the polyphony of the bigger, longer history analyzed by Morrison – the history of slavery. *Beloved* is also a novel which finely utilizes the Bakhtinian concepts of “heteroglossia” and “dialogism,” and the “in-between spaces” and “splitting” in Bhabha. By producing the effects of heteroglossia through multiple subtexts, the contesting stories in *Beloved* undoubtedly challenge once again the monistic discourse of slavery as interpreted one-sidedly from the position of the dominant race. In this sense, heteroglossia means not only a varied discourse, but primarily a discourse implying a multiplication of social accents and registers. In other words, we realize how the dialogic concept turns to be “a double-talk, the necessary obliqueness of any persecuted speech that cannot, at the risk of survival, openly say what it means to say. . .”<sup>13</sup> From an even broader cultural perspective, the literary heteroglossia can be related to what Bhabha calls social “splitting”:

Splitting constitutes an intricate strategy of defence and differentiation in the colonial discourse. Two contradictory and independent attitudes inhabit the *same place*, one takes account of reality, the other is under the influence of instincts which detach the ego from reality. This results in the production of multiple and contradictory belief. The enunciatory moment of multiple

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(the text as narration). In a similar way the French narratologist Gerard Genette distinguishes between “story” (*histoire*) and “text” (*recit*).

11. Mary Paniccia Carden, “Models of Memory and Romance: the Dual Endings of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Winter (1999), [www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com) (Accessed on 1st March 2004).

12. An extremely lucid analysis of the concept is to be found in Dianne Elam’s book *Feminism and Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 1994).

13. Paul De Man, “Dialogue and Dialogism” in *Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 107.

belief is both a defence against the anxiety of difference, and itself *productive* of differentiations.<sup>14</sup>

This observation is very much to the point in the case of *Beloved*, since the author is dealing with such splitting and “speeches” under threat. Such splitting is to be found in the speech and story of Sethe at the cross-road of slavery and “emancipation”; in Denver’s speech of living in a haunted present and coming to terms with history that she has never witnessed; in Baby Suggs’ “chromatic” speech of psychological healing; in Paul D’s speech of keeping the rusted “tin with his red heart” deeply buried in his soul and learning how to live again in freedom; in *Beloved*’s all-consuming speech in relation to the rest of the characters of the novel, demanding love and to be “named again.” In any case, as Elaine Scarry writes, “the introduction of the voice reintroduces multiplicity” in the narrative<sup>15</sup> and Morrison makes ultimate use of such multiplicity in her novel. To juxtapose the two competing discourses of the past and the present, she introduces the voices of schoolteacher, Garner, Amy Denver, Mr. Bodwin, besides the voices of Sethe, Baby Suggs, Denver, *Beloved*, Paul D, and Stamp Paid. If the dominant Western civilization discourse is one of visibility and/or lack of visibility,<sup>16</sup> the multiple voices – especially in the Afro-American narrative oral tradition – bring in the possibility for disruption of the dominant power discourse through questioning of the imposed singular authoritative position.

Such a dialogic framework also seeks to explore the persistence of the past into the present of the protagonists, since Terdiman defines memory as “the modality of our relation to the past.”<sup>17</sup> In this sense, I think that *Beloved* provides a very strong example of a novel in which the dialogic mode creates the necessary conditions for the enactment, or performance, of the traumatic memories of the past. As a kind of a “hybrid” model compared to the well-defined chronological linearity of a traditional narrative,<sup>18</sup> the dialogic mode defies the concept of time to voice what has been stifled for years but erupts in the present. Morrison uses both ulterior and anterior

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14. Bhabha, p. 132.

15. Elaine Scarry, ed., *Literature and the Body* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. vii.

16. For a review of the concept of vision, see the introduction in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1993).

17. Terdiman, p. 7.

18. By “chronologically linearity” here I mean a narrative without even foreshadowing or flashback as techniques that break the sequencing of events. In contrast, the dialogic mode plays with the notions of time, sequence, and narrative point of view.

types of narration,<sup>19</sup> which means that in the first instance the narration follows the events, while, in the second instance, it precedes the events narrated in order to produce a double impact upon the reader. This impact brings together two equally emphatic aspects of the reader's involvement with the text itself: first, of being present and partaking of what happens in the present tense of the narration, and second, of obtaining an insider's knowledge about what has already happened to the protagonists. In this way the protagonists in *Beloved* come to life also in a special double mode: in relation to each other, and in relation to the reader *cum* interlocutor. In fact, this "double performativity" is what Bakhtin calls the existence in the novel of "I-for-the-other" and "I-for-myself" because, as he points out,

Being is always 'co-being'. . . To the extent that it always implies self-other interaction, being is always an 'event,' an act, since myself needs the other, to become an I-for-the-other, to assimilate temporarily the other's point of view, so that to be an I-for-myself (and vice versa).<sup>20</sup>

In terms of the characters' interactions and relations in *Beloved*, I-for-the-other, or being-with/being-in-the-world,<sup>21</sup> is congruent with the relation between reader and protagonists as well. Of course, there is no denial that such a relation is ethically and ideologically charged by means of the author's investment in the text and the reader's expectations from it. What is interesting, though, is the well-known fact that actually in this interaction, beyond, or maybe in, the realm of the communicative and the aesthetic, we can find also the workings of the political.<sup>22</sup> Through this double mode of representation, i.e. aesthetic but also political, Morrison is painstakingly investing her novel with a historical evaluation of slavery. Such an evaluation is a psychological analysis of the degrading deformations in the human psyche when even life in freedom cannot delete the scars caused by bondage. By telling the story of slavery, and especially the stories of black women like Sethe, deprived of their bodies, yet still not deprived of their power to voice the horrors of the past, Morrison creates a powerful portrait of what she considers the shameful roots of "modern" America or, in other

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19. See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. (London: Routledge, 1983), pp. 89–90.

20. Bakhtin, p. 246.

21. Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity," in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 191.

22. There is a palpable difference between "the ideological" and "the political" in my opinion: the former is a didactic, mind-impregnating philosophy, while the latter seeks more active engagement with topical problematics.

words, she writes a novel that “challenges America’s faith in the past-ness of the past by undercutting assurance in the resolution of historical trauma.”<sup>23</sup>

Each in its turn, and together in their overall effect, the stories in *Beloved* historicize slavery by means of representationally innovative re-staging of the panopticon of the slaves’ suffering. By using such “re-staging” Morrison aims exactly at estranging the descriptions of physical torture and suffering from an immediate representation in the text, and working instead with a narrative perspective which derives from the memories of her characters. Thus the substitution of direct graphic scenes of human degradation in bondage with the depiction of the much more horrible psychic deformation in the human soul has an even stronger, eerier effect because the ghosts of the past incur more dangerous, long-standing damage upon the individual’s psyche. I would conclude with the fact that Morrison does not decipher the trauma of slavery caused from without by putting a pictorial emphasis upon the brutality of human bondage. Although *Beloved* is rich in references to such brutality, these references are always seen through the memories of the victims, since the writer is interested in the variety of intersubjective traumatic experiences and the ways they are held in abeyance in the memory of the survivors – sometimes against their will, sometimes in accord with their innermost, unspoken needs to remain sane. For her, as an Afro-American writer, the problem of remembering the “unspeakable” and the test of “rememory-ing”<sup>24</sup> the pain are important, decisive steps in solving the problem of “healing from within.”

### **Sethe: her story**

It is a truism in psychoanalysis, but also very simple life wisdom, that one has to pass on the story of suffering to somebody. It does not matter how bitter this story is or how many conflicting and subversive stories are actually hidden within. One has to pass the story on as a significant step in the mourning process, in order to ensure the recogni-

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23. Carden.

24. “Rememory-ing” as term is used frequently by Sethe, and it is worthwhile to use it here instead of “remembering,” because “rememory-ing,” in my view, denotes exactly that significant, repetitive recollection of memories, and their even deeper embedding into the human mind. Maybe in a somewhat indiscreet narratological veer, I would suggest that “rememory-ing” includes exactly the concentric narratological and figural embedding characteristic of the *myse en abyme* effect. Thus, memories, and especially the traumatic ones, are always narrated (although not necessarily voiced) in a highly expressionistic language which plays around a recurrent theme/motif; on the other hand, the figural “rememory-ing” can be activated by a line of seemingly unrelated objects (figures).



tion of her/his human existence after the breakdown caused by the trauma. The individual story, it seems, is the *différance* which can produce a "ripple" in an otherwise endless, somehow *atemporal* social discourse, or "show how historical agency is transformed through the signifying process; how the historical event is represented in a discourse that is *somehow beyond control*."<sup>25</sup> And yet in the last chapter of *Beloved* Morrison emphatically uses the statement "It was not a story to pass on" as if to remind us that the ghosts of the past, imprinted in the memories of suffering, could hardly be contained in a single unified story. The psychic history of slavery, or any traumatic event for that matter, is hardly conceivable as a linear story which builds upon what scholars call "ordinary or narrative memory."<sup>26</sup> In narrative memory the individual uses mental constructs to make sense of experiences, but in trauma such straightforward sequencing is hardly possible. In trauma, the pain, which is inextricable from the experience, finds vent only in the repetitive, symptomatic return of the repressed:

Suffering is voiceless in the metaphorical sense that silence becomes a sign of something ultimately unknowable. It implies an experience not just disturbing or repugnant but inaccessible to understanding. In this sense, suffering encompasses an irreducible nonverbal dimension that we cannot know – not at least in any normal mode of knowing – because it happens in a realm beyond language.<sup>27</sup>

The articulation of memories of suffering through breaking of linguistic boundaries or in the silence of the traumatically arrested speech is an expedient instance of a form of self-articulation typical of modernity. As Freeman writes, for example, the self no longer relates to modernity in terms of being a focal point of discourse, but in terms of being a radiation, or "destination."<sup>28</sup> In her novel *Beloved*, Morrison explores the loss of the unified self in the specific context of slavery, which deprives equally men and women of their humanity. However, the striving after narrating stories of what has happened to the individual, thus "rememory-ing" the past in its grandiose abnormality, is already an attempt to match and "glue" together the bits and pieces of the split self in the present that the novel depicts.

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25. Bhabha, p. 12.

26. B. A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," *American Imago* 4 (1991) 425–454, p. 427

27. David Morris, "About Suffering: Voice, Genre, and Moral Community," *Daedalus* 1 (1996) 25–45, p. 27.

28. Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self* (London: Routledge, 1993).

The story of Sethe and the infanticide she commits is only one aspect of the appalling power of the dark and amorphous slave past to make a nightmare of the present as well. It is one subtext in the array of subtexts present in *Beloved*, yet it rightfully dominates the narrative space of the novel with its accumulated referential power. Besides the haunting ghost of the infanticide which literally inhabits the house at 124 in the shape of Beloved, for Sethe there is a much more serious job to be done, the job of “beating back the past” as a whole.<sup>29</sup> If the dark past is fought off as a battle, the future hardly holds any promise either. Thus what remains of the present for Sethe is a continuous struggle to come to terms with her own life and tragic destiny. In other words, the present, as Bhabha points out,

can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities.<sup>30</sup>

The history of Sethe is revealed through gradation, fragmentation, and symbolic transference, until it finally stands in a synecdochal correlation to the intresubjective histories of the invisible millions of African Americans. Thus, as do all of the characters in *Beloved*, Sethe tells at once a private and communal story, a story of slavery and escape into freedom that is still a form of slavery, which continues to be such for a long time in post-Civil War America. As paradoxical as it might sound, the escape into freedom turns into an escape into a new form of slavery in the post-Civil War present. Thus the 1860s present in Cincinnati, Ohio, is just as tormenting as the slavery of the not-so-remote past, for in the present, physical bondage is simply substituted by an even more rigid social one, in which the haunting ghost of slavery still precludes the healing of the ex-slave’s psyche.

Morrison’s choice is to get deep into the psychologically coercive forces that make Sethe “fall down from the clouds” of the desired present and to explore the haunting memories of the past, rather than to narrate a story merely enumerating already too well-known atrocities. While pain and suffering surely linger on the pages of *Beloved* as talked about or remembered by Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, or Stamp Paid, the writer focuses on the intersubjective transferences of the “impossible” legacy of the slave past into the present, and the dual human need to remember and to forget the memories of that past. As Morrison makes clear, this is an extremely problematic, even threatening

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29. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: A Plume Book, 1988), p. 73. All parenthesised references are to this edition.

30. Bhabha, p. 4.

need, because it estranges Sethe and the rest of the characters from the traditional “moral community”<sup>31</sup> of African Americans in post-Civil War America, who are, naturally, most willing to forget the past, or rather, to turn their backs (literally, maimed backs) on it. Thus, the group of African American good women, who come to prevent “past errors from taking possession of the present” (256) at 124 Bluestone Road by exorcising *Beloved*, make a step towards rejecting the past, while Sethe gladly lives with the ghosts from that past. Put in a more poetic language, this particular need to live with the ghosts brings forth for Sethe and her kin that “second” kind of loneliness about which Morrison writes in *Beloved*:

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship's, smoothes and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind – wrapped tight like skin. Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place (274).

Sethe's ability to face and live through these two kinds of loneliness is undoubtedly the kernel of the novel. As a philosophic focus, this ability bespeaks the ultimate power of the individual to pass master the trial of social exclusion, and, more importantly, to survive the endless trial of “rememory-ing” one's past. Hence, in *Beloved* we find the recurrent use and play upon the themes of memory, remembrance, forgetting, and already the chronic “disability” to forget. An impressive instance of the latter “disease” is the conversation between Baby Suggs and Sethe:

Baby Suggs rubbed her eye-brows. “My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember.”

“That's all you let yourself remember,” Sethe has told her, but she was down to one herself – one alive, that is. . . . As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious (6).

The hidden aspect of this exchange is the question of the scope of human memory, and whether and how one can re-adjust it, in order to remedy one's psyche. In other words, how do we achieve forgetfulness? This problem is poignantly developed throughout the

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31. The term is coined by the philosopher Tom Regan in *The Thee Generation: Reflections on the Coming Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

novel in terms of the impossible suppression of traumatic memories, and the problematic existence they entail for the individual's future. According to Derrida, for example,

Memory is the name of what is no longer only a mental "capacity" oriented toward one of the three modes of the present, the past present, which could be dissociated from the present and the future present. Memory projects itself toward the future, and it constitutes the presence of the present.<sup>32</sup>

Morrison, then, demonstrates that there is no placebo effect of forgetting, and, equally, no remembrance can effectively silence a sore memory which sometimes outcries the deed itself. Thus, the rememory-ing of the past is the breaking up of the present, and, equally, breaking up with the utopic future of forgetting. In other words, by breaking up with temporality as a linear, bounded inevitability, Sethe enters a kind of intertemporal space, where sharing of the past is possible.

I would like to suggest that the voices of the protagonists in *Beloved* are engaged in intricate, intersubjective dialogues with each other, while constantly "remembering it all," and trying to communicate their past experiences to the others, and/or trying to forget the phantoms of the past. Thus Paul D's appearance in the house on Bluestone Road, "as if to punish her further for her terrible memory" (6), is a key moment for the decoding of Sethe's hectic existence at 124. She is desperately trying to put up with the trauma of the infanticide, a trauma in which she is both a subject and an object. Like any liminal experience, it both suffocates with its presence and, equally, stifles when not "there." In an effort to forget, yet giving in to remembering the act of murder, Sethe contemplates her life while

. . . resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can't hold another bite? But my greedy brain says, Oh thanks, I'd love more – so I add more. And no sooner than I do, there is no stopping. . . I have other things to do: worry, for example, about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved, about age and sickness, not to speak of love (70).

It becomes obvious from the extended quotation above that Sethe's memory undergoes allegorical somatic transformation: it has a life of its own, feeding on Sethe's life, drinking the energy which enables her to live in the present. For memory is always

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32. Jacques Derrida, "The Art of Memories" in *Memories for Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

a memory of the past which is energized by the clash with the present, and the site of this clash in the case of *Beloved* is the maternal body. Hence, for Sethe as a mother what is at stake is the ability to overcome memory but, paradoxically, without losing this memory, and, simultaneously, to survive in, and against, the rememory-ing of the past. The resolution of all this bounds her to yet another marginal status of an outsider in a community that wants to learn to forget. In temporal terms her marginalization appears at the intersection of past and present, thus Sethe is naturally "immune" to the future, to her "the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (42). I am tempted to connect her "immunity" again to her slave past which negates any conception of a life beyond the limitation of the very palpable physical present:

But her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more. It left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day. . . Other people went crazy, why couldn't she? Other people's brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new. . . What a relief to stop it right there. Close. Shut. . . (70)

At this point I would consider defining Sethe's state of mind as a state of hyperamnesia, which in medical terms means, "unexpected amplifications or recurrences of memory, experiences in which mnemonic contents that had seemed annihilated are 'resuscitated' and 'regain their intensity.'"<sup>33</sup> In this sense the critical proliferation of traumatic memories in Sethe is an outstanding case of hyperamnesia, since it also directly entails Sethe's problematic relation to the present, in which, after eighteen years, she is still the isolato, stained with her baby's blood. Is it strange that, as Terdiman suggests, "if life is painful, its integral reproduction in hyperamnesic recollection can hardly transform it into triumph"?<sup>34</sup>

One is tempted, then, to interpret Sethe's "downpour" of memories in terms of the Freudian storage model, which "sees repression as an unconscious psychic defence mechanism shielding victims from knowledge of traumatic events."<sup>35</sup> However, I would argue that this is not the case with Sethe, since, instead of repressing it, she is constantly, although unconsciously, recalling the traumatic experience in the literal sense of the phrase, i.e. she embodies it in the language of memory, which helps her out in telling the story of suffering. For example, such re-living of the past is her

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33. Theodule Ribot, *Diseases of Memory* (Washington, DC: University Publications of America, 1977), quoted in Terdiman, p. 198.

34. Terdiman, p. 198.

35. Pamela Ballinger, "The Culture of Survivors," *History and Memory* 1 (1998), p. 102.

repetitive returns to the haunting memories of the white boys who have “stolen her milk,” raping her literally as a woman, and metaphorically as a life-provider for her baby. Or Sethe’s recurrent memories of Sweet Home, at the same time blood-chilling and cunningly misleading as the name of the place, which only *then and there*, in the farm itself, could produce the delusive effect of family and belonging upon the needy slave’s mind. And most of all the memories of Beloved, her enchanted free floating in time and space as the baby’s ghost and its harsh roaming through Sethe’s life as the African girl of the Middle Passage. In this sense, as Kristeva argues,

Naming suffering, exalting it, dissecting it into its smallest components – that is doubtless a way to curb mourning. To revel in it at times, but also to go beyond it, moving on to another form, not so scorching, more and more perfunctory. . .<sup>36</sup>

I would rather agree and discuss Sethe’s memory excess and the saturation of the present with the past in terms of a necessary “naming” in mourning, since Luckhurst states that “mourning requires a proper name . . . a set of reiterable social rituals and a structure of familial memorialisation.”<sup>37</sup> For Sethe, the set of reiterable social rituals can be transcribed in the on-going struggle with the ghost of Beloved, and later with its incarnation, the African girl, while the structure of familial memorialisation can be traced to Denver’s spiritual crush on Beloved, and successful overcoming of it. In an extended “familial” version, the latter structure can be related also to Paul D’s and Stamp Paid’s coming to terms with Beloved. Thus, in an act of symbolic baptism, Sethe literally names her dead baby “Beloved,” so that she can later relate to the ghost and call it its own name:

Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten “Dearly” too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible – that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby’s headstone: Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered. . . (5)

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36. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, tr. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 97.

37. Roger Luckhurst, “‘Impossible Mourning’ in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *Critique* 4 (1996), p. 244.

In the act of prostituting her body – already her *own* body – Sethe finds also the symbolic voice to name her child: giving away its dead body, yet never “giving away” its name either to the engraver, or to the appalled community. While to a certain extent the other two elements of the mourning, the set of reiterable social rituals and the structure of familial memorialisation, are still available to Sethe, it is very much the coming to linguistic terms with the “unnameable” ghost that appeases her mind in an exceptionally odd way. On the one hand, this symbolic act of baptism for Sethe means partial reconciliation with the terrorizing past, while on the other hand, from that point on, the ghost of *Beloved* will be easily called forth in the present, having once undergone the rite of baptism, which has transformed “it” into the *Beloved* one.

This point ties to my interpretation above of Sethe’s hyperamnesic state of mind. What finally appears on the surface is, namely, the recurrent clash of two questions: one is, “What is ‘me’ now?” and the second one, “What happened to the ‘me’ in the past?” Both of these questions inject Sethe’s life with an existential uncertainty of a more complicated nature than the uncertainty of mere physical existence in slavery. In my view, what makes her memory so uncompromising and unforgiving is the lack of secure self-anchoring into a meaningful present that can effectively fight back the more dangerous ghosts from the past. Such a lack of self-anchoring, on the other hand, is what makes Sethe’s haunting memories shared, intersubjective communal memories:

Ghosts are the signals of atrocities, marking sites of an untold violence, a traumatic past whose traces remain to attest to the fact of a lack of testimony. A haunting does not initiate a story; it is sign of blockage of story, a hurt that has not been honored by a memorializing narrative. The geography of *Beloved* is punctured by traumas that have not been bound into a story. . .<sup>38</sup>

Thus we can explain Sethe’s “circling around” the story of her infanticide, and the inability to communicate it to Paul D, or to Denver. As Sethe realizes, for example in connection to Paul D, there are “things neither knew about the other – the things neither had word-shapes for” (99). Even when she speaks up, assuming the role of narrator in the structure of the novel, Sethe is speaking in a stream-of-consciousness mode, defying narrative schemes of temporal causality. In other words, as Wyatt argues, “There are no gaps in Sethe’s world, no absences to be filled in with

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38. Luckhurst, p. 247.

signifiers; everything is there, an oppressive plenitude.”<sup>39</sup> It is not a mere game of chance that Sethe constantly reminds herself and the rest of the protagonists that there is no way out of rememory-ing “things” from the past, the things that could spiritually kill oneself with the immediacy of their phantasmic presence or, equally, with the absence from one’s memory. Therefore, she says,

What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw, is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. . . (36)

Obviously, Sethe is more of a mediator of memories than a proper storyteller in this case: being a woman still haunted by the past, she is symbolically “pregnant” with stories of that unspeakable past. But then again, Sethe is preoccupied with the resurrection of a significant loss into the present, and, therefore, she neglects the trivia of what can be deemed “normal existence” by her community. For example, speaking to Denver about the past in Sweet Home, Sethe makes the following point:

Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it dies... if you go there – you who never was there... and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again... Because even though it’s all over – all over and done with – it’s going to always be there waiting for you (36).

The process of rememory-ing and the obverse process of forgetting are securely interwoven into Sethe’s mind, and, I would suggest, also inscribed on her body. In the literal sense of the word, she bears on her back the stigma of the slave past, yet what is fascinating in this case is the different interpretations of the monstrous blot on her back by the various characters in *Beloved*. What the others actually see and interpret is lived experience for Sethe: the runaway white girl, Amy Denver, compares the intricate “design” on Sethe’s back to a chokecherry tree; Paul D sees a sculpture, “the decorative work of an ironsmith”; Baby Suggs compares the scar to a “pattern of roses” (17). An interesting common denominator in these three comparisons, or rather poetic simile for the ultimately debilitating slave experience, is their reference to something exquisite and beautiful, void of the opaqueness of human suffering. Although naturally Sethe cannot see the tree, or the roses, or the sculpture on her back, she carries the imprint of it through life, and it invests every single experience with the shapeless, shadowy presence of painful memories.

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39. Jean Wyatt, “Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *PMLA*, Vol. 108, Nr. 3 (1993), p. 477.



What *Beloved* makes clear is that there is no stasis, no temporal permanence for any of the characters. It seems to me that Sethe is the one who defies most conspicuously any hypothetical possibility of "being the same," for she is in the process of making herself visible and heard, if not through active social performance, then through the gaze of the people closest to her.<sup>40</sup> If Sethe exists on the margins of the margin itself, i.e. living on the divide between slavery and freedom, she needs to master a language that can speak about the liminal experiences of the haunting past. Speaking about the past is an act towards recuperation, an act that Luckhurst calls "possible mourning" which means "remembering to forget to work through, interiorize, and then pass over. Impossible mourning is forgetting to remember. . ." <sup>41</sup> For Sethe, to achieve in language such "possible mourning" is to embrace the idea of herself as a maternal body with access to the realm of the semiotic, the domain of the fluid maternal language that defies the rules and regulations of the symbolic order.<sup>42</sup> Without claiming that Sethe's relationship to the semiotic domain is an absolutely liberating, "positive" one,<sup>43</sup> for her the appropriation of the semiotic is the only way out of the vicious circle of the past which inhibits life in the present. Thus, being marginalized by the symbolic, Sethe is at least the sole proprietor of the semiotic language, which not only voices the maternal cry of pain and loss, but also functions as a viable transmitter of private history into the public realm. She is, therefore, involved in a complex psychic process of transformation already suggested by her specific way of speaking about the past, or, rather, of entertaining silence about it. Such a silence, though, is impregnated with a bizarre energy:

Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed upon this body – always already involved in a semiotic process. . .<sup>44</sup>

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40. For various reasons in the different stages of her life, Sethe is seldom among "other" people from the community, and her very close kin are the ones to exercise that formative gaze on her. Although Denver also makes a significant step to get out of 124 Bluestone Road and find a job in Cincinnati, she has no first-hand experience of bondage.

41. Luckhurst, p. 250.

42. For a detailed analysis of the semiotic and the symbolic see Kristeva.

43. As Kristeva also argues, for adults to inhabit permanently the realm of the semiotic means to live in a psychotic state.

44. Kristeva, p. 25.

This energy, then, opens the door to that important re-structuring of the self, or, in the case of the former slave Sethe, the creation of a concept of self. The structure of this new self has a double origin: first, it is physical, because it originates in her position as a woman and mother, abused, raped, and persecuted; second, the social origin is connected to her position as an individual in a slave society which *a priori* denigrates women, and black women especially. As Morrison acutely points out in an interview, “The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis. . .”<sup>45</sup> In this way the specific language of Sethe, as a racial mother coming to terms with traumas, is an escape from psychosis and fragmentation; it is a subversive act of keeping at bay the violence of a symbolic order that has eliminated any possibility of self-constitution in the past, and still infiltrates the present in the 1860s. That is how Sethe, still doubting her own selfhood, responds with a question to Paul D’s words:

“ . . . me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow... You your best thing, Sethe. You are.”  
 “Me? Me?” (273)

If we believe in Morrison’s words that modern life begins with slavery, *Beloved* is an extended metaphor for the known and unknown atrocities hidden in the cradle of American modernity. In terms of history, I think that Morrison as a novelist works towards an ultimate defamiliarization of historical temporalities through hybridization of the narrative, in order to produce a discourse of cultural difference that speaks of the comparatively recent unspeakable past, and its imprint in the still problematic present.<sup>46</sup> Breaking up temporal linearity, then, is a viable way towards articulation of the sense of self in the testing present of post-Civil War America, through “rememory-ing” and narration of the scattered liminal experiences from the past. Far from being a complete dissolution of the traumatic past for her character, Sethe, such a state of “in-between-ness” – living between the past and the present – for the writer means a continuous heterochronous process which makes “possible mourning” and healing from within work. This process has to cure in personal and social terms through finding words to voice the trauma, as much as to stay forever in the memory of her characters, and especially in the memory of Sethe.

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45. Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” in *Toni Morrison*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1990), p. 214.

46. By “problematic present” I mean the existing racial and ethnic tension still to be found in American society.