

Constructing Black Subjectivity

Trauma and Recovery in Toni Morrison's Novels

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Abstract: Trauma and recovery are the two ends of the process that Toni Morrison's novels are centred around. Characters carry either transgenerational traumas or they experience them in early childhood. Once they are traumatised, they are much more likely to receive several layers of wounds in the future. This essay explores the different types and sources of trauma, as well as ways of recovery, in five of Toni Morrison's novels: The Bluest Eye, Beloved, Home, A Mercy, and God Help the Child. It concludes that all the main characters suffer from being neglected and refused as children; some of them were said to be ugly and/or used as bodies (objects) by their parents. Social acceptance and forgiveness are identified as the main sources of the healing process as storytelling starts with the creation of a listener (often on another communicational level: the trauma victim narrates the story to the reader of the novel), thereby establishing a relationship between the trauma victim and the community.

Trauma has many definitions and types; however, some symptoms are considered representative for all kinds. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth emphasises the feeling of being unprepared (62). This means that the individual does not understand what is happening: either they are not prepared emotionally or intellectually, or they do not have any information about it. Thus, they cannot interpret the event, which means that it cannot be experienced when it happens, only belatedly (62), as experience “is already an interpretation of the past and of our place in a culturally and historically specific present” (Smith and Watson 31). Most people are not prepared for witnessing death or life-threatening events, whereas there

are events which might be traumatic for some but not for others. Traumatic events cannot be told or spoken about; thus, they cannot be integrated in the narrative self, that is, they do not have a place in the chronological life story. “Obsessional memory” (Smith and Watson 28) and the continuous presence and intrusion of the traumatic scenes (Herman 37) result from the unintegratable experience, creating a kind of parallel time. This way trauma disrupts the sense of time: “it is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (Caruth 61). The person becomes isolated as a result of the weight of unshareable experience; social relationships are also destroyed, or at least questioned; “[t]he traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others” (Herman 53). Moreover, it is not only the social embeddedness of the subject that is lost; the self is also deprived of their own body, thereby experiencing the loss of home on two levels: societal and individual (physical). The body is no longer one’s own domain; “[c]ontrol over bodily functions is often lost” (Herman 53). As Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber puts it, “the body becomes a placeholder for memory and trauma” (1): the body is distorted or at least affected by trauma physically, often visibly. As a result of the loss of an intersubjective, embodied, narrative self, the traumatised person is deprived of agency and subjectivity and, furthermore, of any kind of control over one’s relationships, body and stories; the person cannot speak or act as an acknowledged member of society. Therefore, we can conclude that trauma is the destruction of the subject.

Toni Morrison narrates the unspeakable experience of trauma victims, thereby creating subjectivity for them, giving back their stories and their place in the community (or home in Schreiber’s words). The novels narrate “the black struggle for subjectivity” (Schreiber 1), showing us various ways to recover, in order to participate in life as full members again. Furthermore, these stories do not narrate only individual traumas but also share fragments of the collective memory of the black community; by narrating these black selves, the novels create black subjecthood on a community level. According to Schreiber, “coping with trauma involves a reconstitution of the self” (32). Community (its acceptance and forgiveness), regaining ownership of the body and the narration of the traumatic experience are the most important components of recovery from trauma and of regaining agency and subjectivity. However, there is one element that is usually not mentioned, probably the most complex and most difficult one, and that is the forgiveness of the traumatised party (being either an individual or a community). Trauma victims need to forgive both themselves and society for letting the events happen: this way they

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can accept their reintegration in the community and their (sometimes new) social roles as well. A new level of the healing process can be reached when the victim can forgive the abuser.

This essay analyses the process of regaining agency in five of Toni Morrison's novels. All of these novels show characters suffering from childhood trauma, being victims of some form of child abuse. *The Bluest Eye* is the author's first novel, published in 1970. This is the darkest and most pessimistic of these works. The central character, who gets "the bluest eyes" in her imaginary world, suffers several layers of trauma as a child, and, without social support, remains totally alone. Moreover, she experiences very closely the death of an innocent baby, as she is the one who gives birth to it. In the end, she remains a bird wanting to fly away, or just a movement unable to reach its aim. *Beloved* was first published in 1987. The title character, Beloved, represents multiple layers of the traumatic memories of the black community. Moreover, it shows how traumas of this communal past can absorb the survivors and the next generations. Sethe, the main character, starts to realise her self and her own separate existence in the last pages of the novel. *A Mercy*, *Home* and *God Help the Child* were written much later; they are much less tragic than the first two novels. *A Mercy*, first published in 2008, is similar to *Beloved* in many respects. Both narrate the separation of mother and daughter as a result of the decision of the former, with this being traumatic for the latter. Both end with the mother's words: Sethe realising her own self, and *A Mercy* with Florens' mother talking to her daughter, asking for forgiveness. However, in many respects, *A Mercy* is not as loaded as *Beloved*, although it is written from the daughter's perspective mostly. *Home* (2012) also ends with the main characters starting to be integrated into society again, after telling their trauma narratives. This novel is different from the other four as the central trauma is not connected to mother-daughter relationships. *God Help the Child* (2015) is Toni Morrison's last novel. This one ends with the mother talking to her daughter, asking for forgiveness (in her own special way), just like in *A Mercy*. Nevertheless, Bride, the daughter in *God Help the Child*, lives a happy and successful life, could become independent of her mother, and could finally become a subject, processing all past traumas, in contrast with Florens, who desperately keeps writing her memories and reflections on the walls in the final pages of the novel.

The main characters in these novels need to reclaim ownership over their bodies and their voices first, so that they can narrate their stories, thereby creating an experience out of trauma. Oftentimes, the individual is unable to take this step

alone, and it is the community, or someone from the community, that helps them find their voices and, therefore, their own existence. They become subjects through their stories, which are heard by an empathetic listener. Some of these texts invite the reader to participate in the healing process and become the one who listens and so helps the narratives to be integrated in the collective memory of a community.

In my essay, I treat remembering as an intersubjective act, interpreting the past by evoking, narrating, and therefore owning it, creating memory. “Memory is a means of ‘passing on,’ of sharing a social past that may have been obscured, thereby activating its potential for reshaping the future of and for other subjects” (Smith and Watson 26). Remembering can empower individuals, giving them some kind of agency, creating subjects. Collective remembering and shared memories can also create communities: thus, Morrison creates a collective memory for black subjecthood. I use the term “collective memory” as opposed to “personal memory,” partly because it is embedded in culture (stories, art in general, rites), as in Jan Assmann’s “cultural memory,” but also partly because it is present in transgenerational patterns and so embodied, referring to the more recent past, which Assmann names “communicative memory.” Toni Morrison’s stories contain memories of the more recent past (and so its context and social setting), but sometimes they date back to the peak or even the origin of slavery. Consequently, I use the expression “collective memory” entailing both communicative and cultural memory in Assmann’s terminology; however, I suppose these texts will result in being integrated into cultural memory, a narrative space where myth (fiction) and history blends.

SETHE IN *BELLOVED*

Sethe is traumatised on several levels. Besides the childhood trauma of the loss of her mother, she is registered as half-animal, milked like a cow, deprived of her breast milk, then beaten severely, so that an open wound remains on her back, resembling a tree. After nearly dying when escaping from slavery pregnant and even giving birth on the way, she finds her mother-in-law and her children. When her former owners appear to catch her and her children, she kills one of them in delirium. The last one is the most serious trauma of all, which she covers by the others throughout the novel. Moreover, the last three are, in fact, consequences of one other.

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The origin of her trauma is the lack of ownership over her own body, and even her own skin. She was noted in an exercise book like a studied object, her milk was taken, her skin was destroyed: white male superiority engraved itself on her. Later, she realises that even her children are the slave owner's property:

I couldn't get out of my head the thing that woke me up: "While the boys is small." That's what he said and it snapped me awake. They tagged after me the whole day weeding, milking, getting firewood. For now. For now. ... No notebook for my babies and no measuring string neither. What I had to get through later I got through because of you. (232–233)

She could overcome her first trauma by talking to an empathetic listener, Mrs. Garner. Sethe remembers: "Last time I saw her she couldn't do nothing but cry, and I couldn't do a thing for her but wipe her face when I told her what they had done to me. Somebody had to know it. Hear it" (*Beloved* 238). By telling Mrs. Garner the story, Sethe both narrated her trauma and became connected to another person, a listener. Later it was her mother-in-law who gave her body back to her when Sethe arrived at 124. Baby Suggs "bathed her in sections, wrapped her womb, combed her hair, oiled her nipples, stitched her clothes, cleaned her feet, greased her back and dropped just about anything they were doing to massage Sethe's nape when memories overwhelmed her" (Schreiber 44). Both women appear as mother figures to Sethe.

Through pregnancy, the original sense of wholeness is re-established, and intersubjectivity becomes embodied in the positive gaze of the child. For Sethe, motherhood was probably the only possibility to become a subject, gaining acceptance and agency from her children and her husband. According to Smith and Watson, experience "is the very process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject" (31). As it is maternity that provides Sethe with the possibility of an embodied, intersubjective and narrative self, she grabs this identity.

When the schoolteacher finds her, it is the lack of support from the community and the helplessness resulting from the loss of control over her and her children's bodies that change her state of mind. She desperately wants to hold and handle the bodies herself; she wants to become an agent in her life.

As she can never speak about the death of her child, and no one else does either, it does not become a memory, nor an experience or a narrative. Consequently, this

event remains a trauma continuously disrupting the present without being integrated: a timeless presence visiting the world of the living. When Paul D arrives, he expels the ghost, and starts a healing process with Sethe: they give back their bodies to each other by touching and kissing every part, even the scars, and they narrate the so-far unspeakable stories that can become memories and owned experience for them. There is only one exception: the death of Beloved, her murdered daughter. Therefore, Sethe remains traumatised and continuously haunted by the event.

Trauma is literal and physical, as Jean Wyatt explored it in her article. It is so close to Sethe that it becomes a corporeal being which intertwines with her body, wants to become one with it, inhabit and own it. Then her trauma grows as a pregnant woman, two bodies in one (including Sethe's and Beloved's trauma), bigger and bigger, while the body that was once called Sethe shrinks. Beloved is eating life out of her mother's body, devouring her. Without the intervention of the community, Sethe would have been annihilated by her trauma. Although it is Paul D who tries to lead her back to social life, he is devastated when he learns about the murder of Beloved. He demands an explanation; he wants to make Sethe understand that what she has done is wrong. He wants a rational resolution; the empathy he has provided her before does not work without limits. Moreover, he does not realise that Sethe is still possessed by her trauma. It is only the community of the women who can provide that support, acceptance, and forgiveness. It is society that helps her and gives her authority to forgive herself as well as the community:

A woman dropped to her knees. Half of the others did likewise. Denver saw lowered heads, but could not hear the lead prayer—only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it. Yes. (304)

Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (308)

As Schreiber claims, the women of the community “howl to verbalise their shared pain and trauma” because they want to redefine themselves, free themselves “of generational patterns and embodied trauma” (51). They both forgive Sethe and

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ask her to forgive them for leaving her alone. By owning and experiencing their narratives, they place it in their life stories, in chronology. By inserting narratives in their rightful place, they can reach “an imagined wholeness” (Schreiber 42). Through social support, “forgiveness and assistance,” “connection and communal rememory” (Schreiber 42), Sethe will be able to regain her subjectivity. Moreover, this happens on a communal level as well: the women forgive themselves, that is, the black community for not helping everyone in need, and also those black women who hurt their children (or others) resulting from the traumas of slavery, thereby recreating black collective memory and subjecthood.

At the end of the novel, Sethe says, “[s]he was my best thing” (Morrison, *Beloved* 321) reflecting on Beloved’s disappearance; however, Paul D makes her realise and recognise her own existence by saying: “You your best thing, Sethe, You are” (322). The last words of the novel, except for a very last chapter including the comments of the narrator, are “Me? Me?” (322). It is the moment when Sethe recognises her separate but intersubjective self.

PECOLA IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

The core of Pecola’s trauma in *The Bluest Eye* is transgenerational. Pecola’s father, Cholly, was left by his mother, and twice by his father. “When his father rejects him, he experiences a traumatic bodily response, crying and losing control of his bowels” (Schreiber 76); the lost control over the body and its physical reactions result from trauma. Cholly’s body is used as a sight during his first sexual intercourse, as he is raped in a way: his body is objectified and exploited by white males. This event strengthens his self-hatred and feelings about being unlovable and unable to manage his own life, as he is unable to defend the girl and himself. Moreover, he cannot be angry at the aggressors, because they are too powerful to be angry at:

Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. ... For now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. (118)

Mrs. Breedlove or Pauline, Pecola's mother, experienced certain wounds and losses in her body, which resulted in her feeling ugly: a nail pierced one of her feet in her childhood, which made her limp, and she lost one front tooth, which made her unable to look like movie stars, which she wanted very much. Morrison explains: "Her general feelings of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot"; consequently, her isolation begins as a bodily injury (*The Bluest Eye* 86). She gains agency only as a perfect maid, as she receives the positive gaze from a white family. Outside that position she is no more than an empty name, Mrs. Breedlove, even for her children. She cannot be called "mum," has no nickname, which she has always wanted, has no friends; however, as a maid she is Polly (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 99). "Her imaginary self cannot exist in her own home" (Schreiber 78), as it is restricted to her role in a white family, and it is strictly connected to the possibilities offered by white supremacy. This imaginary self is a fixed role and only gives a very restricted agency to Polly.

Her whole family is seen as ugly; therefore, she identifies herself with this quality. Schreiber suggests that Mrs. Breedlove "passes this legacy" of being ugly "on to Sammy and Pecola" (Schreiber 78). Pecola inherits all the traumas of her family: being an outcast, at the fringe of society, being hurt by everyone, living without social support and supportive relationships. Her body is used by her father and by Soaphead Church as well, who uses her (body) to kill a hated dog. When she tells her mother that she has been raped, her words are discredited. Her narrative is treated as non-existent without an empathetic listener. Thus, she is left without an intersubjective, embodied, narrative self. Without support she cannot forgive and cannot be forgiven: "her mother's rejection and the community's blame and desertion leave Pecola totally defenceless" (Schreiber 80).

There are two groups that provide support for Pecola in the first part of the novel: the prostitutes and the MacTeer girls. Nonetheless, after she is raped and realises that she is pregnant, she does not dare visit the women or meet the girls. Still, Claudia remains a central figure in the text as she is one of the narrators, the only one who is part of the story, as the other narrator is an objective omniscient one. She, who is also a black girl and thereby shares some of her experience, narrates Pecola's story instead of her, because Pecola will never have the possibility to regain her self, her voice; and that is what makes this text one of Morrison's most tragic novels. Even the possibility of recovery is eliminated, there is no hope in the end.

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FLORENS IN *A MERCY*

Florens, in *A Mercy*, has one core trauma that affects her whole life: her mother tells Vaark, a new landlord and slave owner coming to the house of their owner for his money, to take her daughter as a compensation for the debt, instead of herself, in order to save the girl from the assaults of their present owner. “Florens experiences erasure when her mother, while holding on to her nursing son, offers” her to Vaark (Schreiber 167). She feels that she is refused by her mother, and her body is given away. As Schreiber states: “Florens is not a human but rather goods to be traded” (166), which is a common experience of slaves. Thereby her body is used, traded by others. She feels that it is not owned and controlled by herself; she is disembodied. She also feels that she is not lovable; she is refused by society, as it is the mother that models relationships with society for babies and small children. Moreover, she does not understand what her mother is saying, and so she cannot react, answer or ask for an explanation. If the *minha mae* had told her stories about their past and her bad experience with the slave owner, D’Ortega, she might have understood her reasons. However, she has not; thereby she remains, just as Pecola Breedlove and Beloved, without a narrative, without an intersubjective, embodied and narrative self. She is obsessed by this vision of her mother talking to her while she does not understand a word. She cannot forgive her mother and herself for the uncommitted sin, which “must be inside her and this evil may explain her mother’s abandonment” (Schreiber 168). She does not know or understand why she was offered to Vaark.

Florens’ love affair with the blacksmith gives her back her body: he “gives Florens a mirrored self she does not get from her mother or her culture” (Schreiber 168), just like Paul D or Baby Suggs gave back hers to Sethe. However, she wants to become one with him, as she says: “I can never not have you have me” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 135), “I don’t want to be free of you because I am live only with you” (68), “You are my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose” (69), and “You alone own me” (139). This resembles Beloved’s striving to unite with Sethe: the desire for this original sense of wholeness is stronger than the need to become an agent, a subject controlling one’s own body, relationships and stories. Moreover, the same is true for Sethe, as the parallel sentences of the Other (Paul D in *Beloved* and the Blacksmith in *A Mercy*), the reactions of a supporting male figure, show: “You your best thing, Sethe” (Morrison, *Beloved* 322) and “Own yourself, woman” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 139).

These male characters want their partners to be agents, to control their lives, and to be aware of and responsible for their actions. However, these imperative words are not enough, and these traumatised women cannot cope with their lives alone at this stage. Florens remains without social connections and a disembodied self. Her dream reflects the vacuum she represents:

I notice I am at the edge of a lake. The blue of it is more than sky, more than any blue I know. ... I am loving it so, I can't stop. I want to put my face deep there. I want to. What is making me hesitate, making me not get the beautiful blue of what I want? ... I take fright when I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing. I put a finger in and watch the water circle. I put my mouth close enough to drink or kiss but I am not even a shadow there. Where is it hiding? Why is it? Soon Daughter Jane is kneeling next to me. ... Oh, Precious, don't fret, she is saying, you will find it.

Besides trying to find a body for herself, Florens is also in search of a narrative and a listener. Storytelling is spatialised as she writes her letters to the blacksmith on the walls and the floor of Vaark's unused and uninhabited house. Notwithstanding, without a listener, in an empty house, words are not heard. By her narrative, Florens is asking for forgiveness and also trying to forgive and understand her mother, the *minha mae* who is talking to her, moving her lips, but she cannot grasp the message. Therefore, Florens repeats this traumatic scene by her own verbalisation and explanation of her past: she tells everything, but nothing is heard by the beloved one—this can be interpreted as a transgenerational pattern.

The novel ends with her mother's monologue explaining her reasons for offering her daughter to a slave owner. Although her words are not understood by the addressee, her daughter, she is listened to and forgiven by the reader. Consequently, her trauma is processed on another level as well: not as a personal experience but as a collective narrative. Florens's story is a narrative that is reintegrated into black history by double narration: she keeps writing her own story (resembling a letter) on the walls, addressing the Blacksmith, while the readers of the novel become listeners to her, her mother's, and the other (omniscient) narrator's interconnected story. This way black collective memory and black subjecthood are reconstructed; her written history does not remain on an individual level.

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FRANK IN *HOME*

Frank has several layers of trauma covering each other. The novel takes the readers through a spiral revealing these different levels and stories, leading to mutual understanding and forgiveness. The first layer is a childhood trauma of witnessing fighting horses and the burial of a man. The vision of the horses has covered the latter: “I really forgot about the burial. I only remembered the horses” (Morrison, *Home* 5). The burial was so traumatic because he saw it with his younger sister; they were children and were watching it while hiding in the grass. Moreover, they could not exactly understand what was happening, so the event remained unprocessed and unintegrated in their narrative:

I grabbed her arm and put a finger to my lips. Never lifting our heads, just peeping through the grass, we saw them pull a body from a wheelbarrow and throw it into a hole already waiting. One foot stuck up over the edge and quivered, as though it could get out, as though with a little effort it could break through the dirt being shovelled in. We could not see the faces of the men doing the burying, only their trousers; but we saw the edge of a spade drive the jerking foot down to join the rest of itself. When she saw that black foot with that creamy pink and mud-streaked sole being whacked into the grave, her whole body began to shake. I hugged her shoulders tight and tried to pull her trembling into my own bones because, as a brother four years older, I thought I could handle it. (4)

Later he learns that the man died in a fight he was forced to participate in with his own son: white people told them that either they kill both of them or they fight for life. The man begged his son to kill him. Although Frank did not know this when he was a little boy, it remained a trauma: an unchanged and intact scene, covered by other memories, waiting to be discovered.

Another layer of his trauma is connected to his participation in war. As a soldier, he experiences that bodies are vulnerable physical realities, can be destroyed very easily: “he saw a boy pushing his entrails back in, holding them in his palms ... or he heard a boy with only the bottom half of his face intact, the lips calling mama” (Morrison, *Home* 20). Among these, the vision of a little girl comes to haunt Frank:

he killed her because she raised his sexual desires and he used her as a body to satisfy himself. Through his narration of the novel, first he states that it was another soldier who did it, but nearing the end of the book he discovers: “I lied to you and I lied to me, I hid it from you because I hid it from me. ... I shot the Korean girl in the face” (Morrison, *Home* 133). He lost control over his body, and he could not integrate these events into his narrative self: “How could I let her live after she took me down to a place I didn’t know was in me? How could I like myself, even be myself if I surrendered to that place where I unzip my fly and let her taste me right then and there?” (Morrison, *Home* 134). He does not feel at home in his body: “Say, who owns this house? / It’s not mine. ... Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?” (Morrison, *Home*, beginning, unnumbered page).

Whenever he starts a new relationship with a woman, his traumas come haunting and disrupting normal life after a while: “the mare always showed up at night” (Morrison, *Home* 33), but during the day often his girlfriend “came home from work and saw him sitting on the sofa staring at the floor. One sock on, the other in his hand. Neither calling his name nor leaning towards his face moved him” (Morrison, *Home* 75). He is unable to speak about it, and sometimes even his body becomes uncontrollable. His behaviour makes him isolated from social life.

It is Cee, his sister, whose immediate need for help changes him: “Only my sister in trouble could force me to even think about going in that direction” (*Home* 84). Here Frank refers to their hometown; however, travelling back there means remembering, by which he starts the process of interpreting and understanding fragments of memories from the past. His connection to Cee seems to be the core of his identity, something without which he cannot really exist. The first reason why his treatment of the little “slant-eyed” girl, and not the losing of comrades, is the most traumatic event of his life is that his core identity is based on being the protective older brother: his relationship with his sister is the most important for him, and he can hardly stop this kind of caring behaviour. The abused child was similar to Cee, a small girl needing protection, and yet his body used her as a female body, furthermore, an object. The second reason is that it was his own deeds that traumatised him, the abusive force did not come from outside, and so he needs to forgive himself to be able to start the recovery process. Although without the context (of the war) this would not have happened, still, he became an abuser—just as Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*. Trauma victims pass on their traumas creating a transgenerational pattern; the only way

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to stop this process is to reveal it, verbalise it, and gain forgiveness for the participants. However, without the support of the community it is not possible.

Frank's healing goes in parallel with his narration. During storytelling, he discovers his forgotten past, fragments of which were hidden even from himself. Besides telling his story to the readers, it is his sister's behaviour that helps him overcome his traumas. His sister's body was used as a kind of experimental place by a white doctor. When Frank takes her and brings her home, she is healed both physically and mentally by the older local women who tell her: "Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. ... you a person too. Don't let ... no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world" (*Home* 126). This reaction of the community resembles Paul D's words to Sethe and the Blacksmith's words to Florens. Probably Cee is the fastest to follow this advice. She accepts the truth, her life as it is, and tries to make the best of it; she does not need her brother's support or help any more.

Nonetheless, the performative act that gives back his agency to Frank is the ritual reburial of the black man who was killed by his own son. He digs out his bones, bundles them in a kilt (the first made by his sister), and buries it under a tree, with a headstone, saying: "Here Stands A Man" (*Home* 145). By this act, he reintegrates the man into society, as he is given a decent burial. This man is forgiven for making his son kill him. Moreover, this ritual of forgiving and reintegration becomes mutual, embracing the buried and the burier, giving back his manhood and agency to Frank. Nevertheless, without realising and narrating his traumatic memories first, he could not have done this. Frank's and the dead man's story are raised onto the communal level and so become part of black collective memory.

BRIDE IN GOD HELP THE CHILD

Although *Bride* continues the pattern of neglected children in Toni Morrison's novels, this novel is different in many ways. She is treated as ugly, because her skin is very dark. The situation of being neglected and seen as hideous by the mother resembles Pecola's in *The Bluest Eye*. Moreover, she cannot call her mother mum either but Sweetness (as compared to Pecola's Mrs. Breedlove). After being deprived of intersubjective support, she is used by her mother to punish a white woman by false witnessing. She "helped put an innocent woman in prison. A long sentence

for childrape the woman never did. ... To get some love—from her mama” (*God Help the Child* 156). Consequently, her body was both used, exploited, and despised. The person closest to her denied her any social support (positive gaze); she is deprived of any company, as she is considered and feels despised.

Nonetheless, she spends her whole life proving the opposite: she becomes a beautiful, independent woman, looked up to and admired by society. She works in a high position in the beauty industry: in the magazines she is looked at as the symbol of beauty. Her blackness becomes attractive and seductive. This way Morrison’s novels reflect how the view of American society changed about skin colour throughout history: her last novel shows the most recent views. Still, all of Bride’s success is not enough to enable her to establish mutually trustful social relationships. That is only made possible by reliving her childhood trauma, narrating her story, understanding her and other people’s motives, and being an empathetic listener to the opposing story of her lover. She has sent an innocent person to prison by becoming a false witness to child abuse; therefore, she feels sorry for the person. On the other hand, her lover’s brother was abused and killed by a man, and she has to empathise with her lover, feel his emotions and rage as well. Thereby she begins to understand what the participants in a story about child abuse feel, something she could not decipher when she was a child. Consequently, this novel gives us the narrative of the abused child’s relatives and also of a false witness, thereby asking for forgiveness for false accusations as well.

By living through Booker’s story and telling him hers, she juxtaposed her experience to his, thereby creating a more or less comprehensive picture of this experience. By rationalising and understanding details, she is able to narrate and integrate her childhood story into her subjectivity. This makes her ready to start a new life becoming a parent. She will probably be conscious of patterns in her past, and she will know how important motherly love is. She will know how to support her daughter to be able to express her feelings, connect to other people, and be conscious of her own body, not letting anyone take control of it. This way, *God Help the Child* becomes Morrison’s most positively ending novel, suggesting that recovery is possible. Thus, it stands in stark contrast to *The Bluest Eye*, although there are multiple similarities in the core narratives.

Interestingly, the novel ends with the mother’s words: the one who caused the core trauma of the main character’s life. This resembles *A Mercy*: the mother explains her reasons, seemingly asking for forgiveness; yet, her words cannot be heard by the one

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she is talking to—as the daughter keeps in contact with her mother still by writing to her, although she does not expect an answer, there “is no return address on the envelope” (*God Help the Child* 177). Thus, the text invites the reader to become the empathetic listener and provide the place for her narrative: transforming trauma into a collective memory. Although she is mainly making excuses for her own behaviour, it is implied indirectly that she explains and understands her daughter’s motives and deeds as well, making us forgive Bride and understand her more thoroughly.

CONCLUSION

Morrison’s novels show us many patterns of trauma. These traumatic events can often be connected to childhood experience, mostly to the relationship with the mother. These traumatised children experience rejection and neglect from the maternal figures, which later shifts to their relationships within society. They usually feel disembodied: their bodies are owned and used by others; they are exploited. They cannot and do not speak about the causes of their isolation, their obsessional memories.

Most of these characters suffer a series of traumatisations: because they are at the fringe of society, they are much more vulnerable. There is often no one they can turn to for support or help. They are also the easiest targets for perpetrators. They repeat their stories again and again until they are either devoured by their trauma or find help in society.

These novels show us the process of recovery starting from a state where a person is obsessed with their trauma and its continuous haunting to the point where healing begins. The most important components of recovery are always social support and forgiveness. Without being accepted, storytelling is impossible as words can be discredited, just as in Pecola’s case. However, it is just as important that the traumatised person can accept the offered forgiveness and (new) role in the society, and can forgive (society and possibly the perpetrator) in return. This becomes important in *Beloved* for Sethe. Narration is always an intersubjective process, needing an empathetic listener. These narratives sometimes evoke the listener in the form of readers, like in *A Mercy*, *Home* and *The Bluest Eye*. Consequently, gaining subjectivity becomes not just an intersubjective, narrative, and embodied process, but a metaliterary one as well. The context and situation of storytelling is created by these texts as a frame

wherein the inclusion of an empathetic listener (the reader) transforms individual trauma into collective memory.

Morrison's novels often evoke some kind of timelessness and include the mixture of magical and realistic elements which shift these stories into the world of myths. As Jan Assmann suggests, in cultural memory "the distinction between myth and history vanishes" (Assmann 113). I propose that Toni Morrison's narratives become parts of black cultural memory (using Assmann's term), "[n]ot the past as such, as it is investigated and reconstructed by archaeologists and historians, ..., but only the past as it is remembered," "as ours" (113). Morrison's characters gain and provide forgiveness to be able to narrate their stories, and they share these memories with us so that they are not forgotten but become part of the cultural memory of and so owned by the black community.

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