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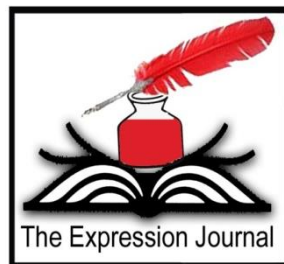


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Trauma Narratives and Memory Studies in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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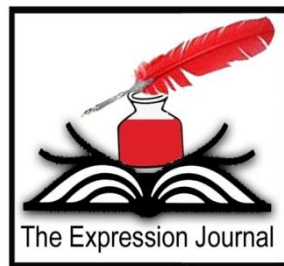
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Abstract

In 1856 an enslaved woman named Margaret Garner escaped from Kentucky with her children, was tracked down in Ohio, and killed her young daughter rather than let the child be carried back into slavery. More than a century later, Toni Morrison turned that event into *Beloved*. This paper reads the novel through trauma theory and memory studies. It draws on Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma is only understood belatedly, and on Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through, to ask how Morrison presents a wound that belongs both to one mother and to a whole people. Sethe's act of infanticide, and the return of her dead daughter as a young woman called Beloved, show what happens when trauma is left unresolved: it does not stay in the past but walks back into the house and sits down at the table. The novel's broken timeline, its memories stored in the body, and its ghost are not decorative choices. They are Morrison's way of telling a story that refuses to be told in order. Memory in *Beloved* is a burden, but it is also a form of resistance, and the novel suggests that healing, when it comes at all, comes through other people. Read in this way, *Beloved* remains a key text for anyone thinking about how literature carries the aftermath of slavery, and how a community learns to live with what it cannot forget.

Keywords

Trauma, Memory, Ghost, Psychological, Slavery, Grief, Belatedness.



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Introduction

Beloved opens with a house that is angry: “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (Morrison, pt. 1). The year is 1873, eight years after the Civil War, and Sethe lives on Bluestone Road outside Cincinnati with her daughter Denver. Her two sons have run away, frightened off by the ghost, and her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, has died. The ghost is Sethe’s elder daughter, the “crawling-already? baby” (Morrison, pt. 1) whose throat Sethe cut eighteen years earlier when slavecatchers rode into the yard. Morrison did not invent the outline of this. In her foreword she recalls coming across the case of Margaret Garner, and she chose to imagine Garner’s inner life rather than reconstruct the historical record. In her essay “The Site of Memory,” she calls this kind of work “literary archeology” (Morrison, “Site” 92): starting from the remains of the past and imagining the lives that the official record left out. *Beloved* is that method in action.

What makes the novel so difficult to put down, and so difficult to read, is that slavery in it is never really over. Sethe is legally free, yet most of her energy goes into what the narrator calls “beating back the past” (Morrison, pt. 1). When she thinks of moving away from the haunted house, Baby Suggs tells her there is no point: “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (Morrison, pt. 1). That line makes a claim this paper takes seriously, namely that the suffering in *Beloved* belongs to a whole people and not only to one family. Using the work of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Marianne Hirsch, and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, I look at how Morrison uses broken structure, a ghost with a body, and the voices of witnesses to show trauma as something that bends time, language and the self.

A Ghost with a Body

The story turns when Paul D, one of the men from the Kentucky farm called Sweet Home, arrives at 124 and drives the baby ghost out of the house. For a short while it looks as though Sethe might have an ordinary life. Then, coming home from a day at the carnival, the three of them find a young woman sitting on a stump near the house, fully dressed, with new skin and

no lines on her hands. She says her name is Beloved. It is the Fone-word Sethe had carved on her daughter's headstone, paid for with ten minutes of sex with the engraver. Here Morrison does not treat memory as a metaphor. She gives it a body. Beloved is a haunting made flesh, and her presence acts out what trauma studies call the compulsion to repeat: the survivor keeps returning to the site of pain because it has never been understood.

Beloved's language is broken, sparse and rhythmic, closer to a small child's speech or to a mind cut off from itself. In the passage in Part Two where she speaks in her own voice, there is almost no punctuation, and time collapses entirely: "All of it is now it is always now" (Morrison, pt. 2). Because the trauma has never been absorbed, she cannot live in ordinary time. She is past and present at once. She also says, "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop" (Morrison, pt. 2), which is about as close as the novel comes to describing the loss of boundaries that trauma produces. In the chapter that follows, Sethe, Denver and Beloved speak in turn until their voices run together into a single chant of "You are mine" (Morrison, pt. 2). Just before this, Sethe finally accepts that Beloved is her daughter, and her first feeling is relief rather than terror: "I don't have to remember nothing" (Morrison, pt. 2). She believes she can now stop explaining herself. That belief is exactly what makes the next stage so dangerous, because a mother who thinks her dead child has forgiven her is ready to give that child everything.

The Body Remembers

Sethe carries slavery in her body. On her back is a mass of scars from a whipping at Sweet Home, which Amy Denver, the white runaway girl who helps her give birth during the escape, describes for her: "It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree" (Morrison, pt. 1). Sethe cannot feel it and has never seen it. The image is quietly brilliant: the wound is permanent, it branches like a living thing, and it sits exactly where she cannot look. Before the whipping, schoolteacher's nephews held her down and took the milk meant for her baby. When Paul D is horrified to hear about the beating, she keeps pulling him back to the other injury: "And they took my milk!" (Morrison, pt. 1). For Sethe, that theft is worse than the whip, because it attacks her as a mother. Amy offers a line that could stand for the whole novel when she rubs Sethe's swollen feet back to feeling: "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (Morrison, pt. 1).

Beloved's appetite does the same work in another key. She craves sweets, watches Sethe constantly and demands her attention. By Part Three Sethe has lost her job at the restaurant and is giving her own food away, growing thinner while Beloved grows larger. The body weakens as memory grows stronger. Morrison seems to suggest that trauma lives in the body until it is faced and released.

Mothers and Daughters Across Generations

Sethe's wound did not begin with her. Her own mother was a stranger to her, a woman who worked in the rice fields and was hanged before Sethe was old enough to know her. The one intimate memory Sethe has is of her mother opening her dress to show a brand burnt under her breast, a circle with a cross, so that her daughter could identify her body if anything happened. Later, Nan, the woman who nursed Sethe, told her that her mother had been taken many times by the crew on the ship and afterwards, and that she had kept only the child whose father she had chosen: "She threw them all away but you" (Morrison, pt. 1). The discovery shocks Sethe, and the reader realises that her act in the woodshed has a history.

Two generations of mothers under slavery have been forced to decide which children could be kept.

Baby Suggs carries the same history in a different form. She had eight children by six fathers, and all but Halle were sold or taken from her, so that she could barely remember them. Her advice to Sethe about grief is practical rather than comforting. Baby Suggs believed that “Everything depends on knowing how much” and that “Good is knowing when to stop” (Morrison, pt. 1). The trouble is that slavery never let these women decide how much. *Beloved*’s own monologue widens the frame even further. Her memories are not only of a woodshed in Ohio but of a crowded ship, of dying people pressed together and of “the men without skin” (Morrison, pt. 2) standing over them. She seems to remember the Middle Passage itself. In this way Morrison lets one ghost carry both a private loss and the collective trauma of the millions carried across the Atlantic, which is why the novel’s dedication reaches so far beyond one family.

Belatedness and Repetition

Cathy Caruth describes trauma as “the story of a wound that cries out,” and argues that a traumatic event is not fully grasped when it happens; it returns later, uninvited, through repeated intrusions (Caruth 4). That is close to a summary of the plot of *Beloved*. Sethe even has her own word for the way the past keeps coming back: “rememory.” She explains it to Denver by saying that when a house burns down, “the place—the picture of it—stays” (Morrison, pt. 1), out in the world where someone else might walk into it. LaCapra’s distinction between “acting out” and “working through” is useful here too. Acting out is compulsive repetition, while working through involves some critical distance and a new way of telling the story (LaCapra 144). For most of the novel Sethe acts out. She circles, repeats and returns. Working through only begins near the end, and she does not manage it alone.

A Story Told Out of Order

The shape of the novel copies the shape of Sethe’s memory. We hear about Sweet Home, the Garners, schoolteacher and the escape in fragments, from different speakers, and rarely in sequence. Even the openings of the three parts track the state of the house: Part One begins “124 was spiteful,” Part Two “124 was loud,” and Part Three “124 was quiet” (Morrison, pts. 1-3). The house moves from rage, to the noise of three women consumed by one another, to the silence that comes before change. The killing itself is held back for a long time. When it finally arrives in Part One, it is told first through the eyes of the men who have come to take Sethe back: schoolteacher, one of his nephews, a slavecatcher and the sheriff. They find her in the woodshed with one child dead and the others bleeding, and schoolteacher decides that she is no longer worth taking. Morrison makes us see the worst moment of the book from the point of view of the people who caused it, which is its own kind of horror. Sethe’s explanation, when it comes, is almost unbearably simple: “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (Morrison, pt. 1).

What goes unsaid matters as much as what is spoken. Sethe hesitates, circles the subject and changes it, and the gaps in her telling show how hard it is to put the unbearable into words. Morrison does not simply describe trauma from outside; she writes from inside it, so that the form of the novel feels the way memory feels. Even the ending refuses closure. *Beloved* vanishes, “disremembered and unaccounted for” (Morrison, pt. 3), and the book closes on the refrain “It was not a story to pass on” (Morrison 324). The phrase cuts both ways. It is a story nobody wants to repeat, and it is also a story that must not be passed over.

Guilt and Conviction

Sethe never fully decides whether what she did was wrong. She lives between guilt and certainty. When Paul D suggests they leave 124, she refuses outright: “I will never run from another thing on this earth” (Morrison, pt. 1). Yet she remains a prisoner of her own memory. Paul D had sensed the danger in her devotion from the start, thinking early in the novel that “For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous” (Morrison, pt. 1). Under slavery, a mother’s love could be taken, sold or used against her, so loving fully was itself a risk. Their argument at the end of Part One shows the distance between them. Paul D tells her, “Your love is too thick,” and she answers, “Thin love ain’t no love at all” (Morrison, pt. 1). Then he says the thing that drives them apart: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (Morrison, pt. 1). Without meaning to, he echoes schoolteacher, whom Sethe once overheard telling a pupil to list her animal characteristics beside her human ones. LaCapra would call the killing a “limit event,” one that breaks ordinary judgement, and the novel never tries to settle it.

Paul D and the Tobacco Tin

Paul D’s suffering is quieter than Sethe’s but no less real. After Sweet Home he was sold, tried to kill his new owner, and ended up on a chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, locked each night in a box sunk into a trench. Earlier, with an iron bit in his mouth, he had been led past a rooster called Mister, and it is the rooster he cannot forget, because Mister was allowed to remain what he was while Paul D was not. To survive, he packed his memories one by one into a tobacco tin in his chest, and by the time he reached 124, “nothing in this world could pry it open” (Morrison, pt. 1).

Caruth notes that trauma often splits consciousness, and the tin is a clear image of that split. It is Beloved who breaks it. She moves him, room by room, out of the main house until he is sleeping in the cold house at the back, and there she asks him to touch her “on the inside part” (Morrison, pt. 1). When the lid finally gives way, he hears himself repeating “Red heart. Red heart” (Morrison, pt. 1). Unlike Sethe, who is drowning in memory, Paul D struggles with numbness, and his years of wandering show how trauma strips away any sense of home. When he returns at the end to sit with a broken Sethe, the novel suggests that working through is possible, but only in company.

Witness, Community and Denver

Long before the crisis, the novel shows what shared healing might look like. After her son Halle buys her freedom, Baby Suggs becomes a preacher without a church, leading the Black people of Cincinnati to a clearing in the woods on Saturday afternoons. There she tells them to love their own bodies, because no one else will: “Here... in this here place, we flesh” (Morrison, pt. 1). The novel is honest about how hard this is. As the narrator says of Sethe’s first weeks of freedom, “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (Morrison, pt. 1). After the killing, the community turns away from 124. Part of the reason is resentment: the day before the slavecatchers came, Baby Suggs threw a feast so generous that her neighbours thought it proud, and none of them sent a warning. Afterwards she gives up preaching and takes to her bed to think about colours.

Stamp Paid is the novel’s other great witness. Born Joshua, he renamed himself after his master’s son took his wife, deciding that whatever he had paid, he owed nobody anything more. He spent years ferrying runaways across the river, and it was he who carried Sethe and the newborn Denver to safety. Yet he is also the one who shows Paul D the newspaper

clipping about the killing, which drives Paul D out of 124. Afterwards, walking by the river, he finds a red ribbon knotted around a curl of hair still attached to a piece of scalp, and he is overwhelmed by everything he has seen done to Black people. Standing outside the house, hearing voices he cannot make out, he asks a question that seems to come from the whole community: "What are these people? You tell me, Jesus. What are they?" (Morrison, pt. 2). Stamp Paid's guilt about the clipping and his grief about the ribbon show that witnessing is not a neutral act. To see is also to take on some of the weight.

Felman and Laub argue that testimony needs a listener; a trauma is not fully known until someone tells it and someone else receives it. For Laub, the listener "comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event" (Felman and Laub 57). *Beloved* acts this out through Denver. By Part Three, Sethe and Beloved are locked together in a bond that is slowly destroying Sethe, and there is no food left in the house. Denver, who has been afraid of the outside world since childhood, stands on the porch unable to move until she hears her dead grandmother telling her to "go on out the yard" (Morrison, pt. 3). She walks to the house of her old teacher, Lady Jones, and asks for help. Soon food begins to appear on the stump at the edge of the yard, left by women who had shunned the family for years. The trauma is no longer carried alone.

The climax is the gathering of thirty women outside 124, led by Ella. Ella has her own reasons for wanting Beloved gone: she was once held captive by a white father and son she calls "the lowest yet" (Morrison, pt. 3), and she has her own buried past. The women pray, then shout, and the sound carries Sethe back to the Clearing, to "the sound that broke the back of words" (Morrison, pt. 3). At that very moment Mr. Bodwin, the white man who has come to collect Denver for work, rides up to the gate. Sethe sees a white man in a hat and runs at him with an ice pick, and this time the women stop her. The scene replays 1855 almost exactly, with two differences: Sethe goes after the threat instead of her child, and the community is there. That, in LaCapra's terms, is the move from acting out towards working through. Beloved disappears.

Rememory and Postmemory

Marianne Hirsch uses the term "postmemory" for the relationship that the "generation after" has to traumas it did not live through (Hirsch 103). Denver is that generation. She was born in a leaking boat on the bank of the Ohio during her mother's escape, and she grew up on stories of Sweet Home without ever seeing it. As a child she stopped hearing for two years after a classmate asked whether her mother had been locked up for murder. Her walk out of the yard suggests that the inherited cycle can be broken, and it matters that she breaks it by joining the community rather than by fleeing it.

Paul D's return is framed by his memory of Sixo, the wildest of the Sweet Home men, who walked thirty miles at night to see the woman he loved and who laughed as he was burned alive after the failed escape. Sixo once explained what that woman meant to him: "She is a friend of my mind" (Morrison, pt. 3). He went on to say that she took the scattered pieces of him and gave them back "in all the right order" (Morrison, pt. 3). That is almost a definition of what a good listener does for a survivor of trauma, and it is exactly what Paul D now hopes to do for Sethe. Morrison says it simply: "He wants to put his story next to hers" (Morrison, pt. 3). Neither story is fixed or erased; they are placed side by side.

He also tells her, "Sethe, me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (Morrison, pt. 3). The line is an honest summary of the novel's view of healing. The past cannot be undone and should not be forgotten, but it can be shared, and

sharing it is what makes a future possible. After eighteen years alone with her memory, Sethe is being offered not forgetting but company.

The final conversation between Paul D and Sethe is where this hope is spoken aloud. Sethe mourns Beloved as “my best thing,” and Paul D answers, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” Her reply, “Me? Me?” (Morrison, pt. 3), is the beginning of an answer rather than the end of one. Morrison dedicated the novel to “Sixty Million and more,” and the doubleness of her closing refrain belongs to that dedication: the book remembers what history chose to forget, while admitting how painful such remembering is.

Conclusion

Beloved presents memory as something alive rather than a record kept in a drawer. Through a broken timeline, a ghost who eats and sleeps and wants, voices that dissolve into one another, and a crowd of women singing outside a haunted house, Morrison gives trauma a shape that a straightforward account could not. Reading the novel alongside Caruth, LaCapra, Hirsch, and Felman and Laub helps explain why it works: trauma arrives late, it repeats, it passes to the next generation, and it needs a listener.

Yet the novel is more than an illustration of theory. It asks its readers to become witnesses themselves, both to the family at 124 and to the millions behind them. Sethe’s story does not end in a cure. It ends with a question, “Me? Me?”, and with a man sitting beside her who is willing to wait for the answer. That may be the most honest thing Morrison could offer: healing that is slow, shared, and never quite finished. In this sense *Beloved* shows that storytelling is not merely a way of representing experience but a way of working on it, and perhaps of beginning to change it.

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