

TRAUMA IN TONI MORRISON’S BELOVED :

AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison, has been considered the most important and representative contemporary African-American woman novelist. She published her first novel in 1970 and her most famous novel, *Beloved*, in 1987. She has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

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Keywords

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Before venturing into a discussion of the manifestations of traumatic haunting, I will conduct a preliminary investigation into the notion of the past and memory as represented in the novel, in order to embed the specific analyses into a general context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, has been considered the most important and representative contemporary African-American woman novelist. She published her first novel in 1970 and her most famous novel, *Beloved*, in 1987. She has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

This paper will examine, by means of a close textual analysis, the dominant role that the traumatic past plays in the present. I will explore the traumatic & haunting nature of the past by investigating the question of who or what are the subjects and objects of the traumatic haunting. I want to discover what consequences the traumatic haunting has for the protagonists' lives and how the characters deal with, deny or suppress the past. In order to analyse the novel's general attitude towards the past, it will be important to find out how the characters escape the haunting, if at all.

Before venturing into a discussion of the manifestations of traumatic haunting, I will conduct a preliminary investigation into the notion of the past and memory as represented in the novel, in order to embed the specific analyses into a general context.

2. The PAST

Beloved explores a part of African-American history through the representation of individual and collective trauma. The past stands for the traumatizing experience of slavery and its aftermath in general, and for Sethe's infanticide in particular. At the center of the novel lies the question of how to remember and place the individual past into the collective past and vice versa. Embedded in this framework, the story focuses on the recovery of an isolated, traumatized individual, Sethe, and her reintegration into a community that is itself a victim of trauma. The novel explores the characters' problematic relationship to their past, which is inevitably bound up with the brutal history of slavery, and examines their attempts and failures to avoid or confront their history of suffering.

The past is the main concern of *Beloved* as it dominates the protagonists' present and future. The novel is set in 1873 during the Reconstruction, but there is a constant and fluid interaction between the past and the present. Deborah Guth describes this situation as a truly symbiotic bond between the present, imaged as haunted mother, and the past, represented in the form of her "murdered and resurrected child" (585). In this way, Linda Krumholz points out that Morrison succeeds in creating more in her novel than a sense of history; she makes the past haunt the present through the "bewildered and bewildering character of *Beloved*" (115). She personifies the traumatic and traumatized past coming back to haunt the present. On the most general level, *Beloved* can be viewed as the symptom of the trauma of the entire society that struggle to confront its horrendous past. Seen in this light, the recovery of the past in *Beloved* is clearly involuntary.

Being a novel of personal and collective remembering, *Beloved* "explores the dynamics" of memory (Guth 575). The traumatized characters are torn between "two warring impulses towards the past, the imperative to remember and the desperate need to forget" (585)¹. Mostly their efforts to repress their horrifying traumatic memories hinder them from moving on. The characters are suspended in time, in a meaningless present, their only goal being to fight back the past. However, the past cannot just be forgotten but must be confronted, for it returns literally and materially to haunt and oppress the central characters of the novel in the form of Sethe's resurrected daughter *Beloved*. David Lawrence summarizes this problem saying that, in portraying the capacity of the past to haunt individual and community life in the present, *Beloved* brings into daylight the "ghosts" that are "harbored by memory and that hold their 'hosts' in thrall, tyrannically dictating thought, emotion, and action" (231).

¹ This is a typical response to trauma, as psychologist Judith Lewis Herman explains: "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (1).

Although in *Beloved* the past exists only in fragmented form in the narratives of the characters, it is an actually lived experience. As Phillip Novak points out, these fragments “are real, concrete, [and] reliable” (214). Morrison’s characters, who have experienced the past themselves, tell their own stories.

3. MEMORY

3.1 TRAUMATIC MEMORIES IN *BELOVED*

Since trauma and memory are so closely linked, it is difficult to separate the two terms, but for analytical reasons it is necessary to make a distinction. Whereas trauma always involves memory, memory needs not be traumatic. Traumatic memory could be viewed as an intensification of haunting memory, since “[t]he story of trauma [...] attests to its endless impact on a life” (Caruth 7). A short definition of trauma might be useful at this point. Generally, trauma is described as the response to “an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (91).

Morrison’s novel has been read in terms of trauma by numerous critics.¹ In *Beloved*, trauma is used as a narrative strategy to make real the representation-defying experience of slavery.² Repetitive phenomena appear frequently in *Beloved*, where the memories of traumatic events of the past haunt the characters like ghosts. This recurring or haunting impact is related to a characteristic phenomenon experienced by victims of trauma, namely the conflation of time: “[W]hen the past is uncontrollably relived,” Dominick LaCapra maintains, “it is as if there were no difference between it and the

¹ For example, Flanagan, Morgenstern, Parker, and Spargo.

² LaCapra argues that “Narratives in fiction may also involve truth claims [...] by providing insight into phenomena such as slavery by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible ‘feel’ for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods. One might [...] make such a case for Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* with respect to the aftermath of slavery and the role of transgenerational, phantomlike forces that haunt later generations” (13-14).

present” (89). This non-linear relationship to time becomes apparent in the novel’s traumatized characters, who are sadly suspended in a continuum of past and present events. Their traumatic memory “does not develop or progress in time” but remains the same (Herman 175).

In the context of trauma, the novel also addresses the problem that, as someone else’s property, ex-slaves have lost authority over their own bodies and, in response to the atrocities of slavery, suffer from the fragmentation and loss of their sense of self. Sethe explains: [t]hat anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. [...] Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up” (B 251).

All the novel’s main characters show these symptoms of trauma and struggle to reconnect with and reclaim their exploited and commodified bodies. As Naomi Morgenstern puts it, *Beloved* “is a novel about a crisis of subjectivity, a crisis inseparable from the traumatic legacy of slave culture” (114). As a kind of personified symptom of the trauma of slavery, the figure of *Beloved*, in particular, embodies the absence or fragmentation of selfhood. A sense of self depends on personal freedom and autonomy, which the slaves were denied. This is exemplified by Baby Suggs, who “call[s] [her] self nothing” (B 142), because she does not have her own name. She cannot accept her slave name, Jenny, given to her by the former master, it does not represent anything for her. Therefore, she renames and reasserts herself with a name that gives her an identity. Similarly, Stamp Paid has chosen his own symbolic name to commemorate his freedom from debt. The absence of a name to claim symbolizes the absence of identity and of an independent self. It is noteworthy that *Beloved* does not have a given name but carries the generic name that represents all the beloved people who died through slavery, including Sethe’s baby.

In the context of trauma, it is very useful to adapt psychoanalytical concepts and focus on trauma in highlighting certain aspects of the novel. Furthermore, my intention is not to venture into the complex discussion of

the role of trauma in history, “a prevalent preoccupation in recent theory and criticism” (LaCapra x), but rather to apply the concept of trauma as an interpretative tool to the specific case of Morrison’s *Beloved*. Nevertheless, trauma theory seems a useful tool to interpret Morrison’s *Beloved*, and above all, the protagonist Sethe.

SETHE

All characters in *Beloved* are victims of trauma, but the novel focuses primarily on the recovery and confrontation of Sethe’s traumatic memories. She is traumatized by several past experiences, the horrible memories of which haunt her and disconnect her from the community. Memory plays a crucial role in her life: “Memory is figured as a menacing force in Sethe’s life — it seems to stalk her — and she works hard to avoid it” (Barnett qtd. in Plasa 73). But Sethe has not simply repressed her memories of the past nor is she obsessed with them, as some critics have claimed.¹ On the contrary, Sethe’s trouble is not so much that she has repressed her memories, but rather that she is unable to forget: “[A]ll her effort was directed not on avoiding pain but on getting through it as quickly as possible” (B 38).

Sethe has different “categories” of memories: some she can consciously recall but does not want to, others - her traumatic memories — return as uncontrollable flashbacks, and only a few has she completely repressed. Most of her memories she cannot recall completely, even though she has witnessed the horrible events, such as the slaveholders raping her and stealing her breast milk. Her memories are fragmented because she did not fully register or understand the traumatic events at the time they occurred. This behavior served as a survival mechanism. After escaping physical slavery, however, “Sethe ha[s] [only] twenty-eight days [...] of unslaved life” (B 95). She erroneously believes that she has “claimed herself” (95), until her former slave master and “owner,” tracks her down to claim her and her

¹ See, for example, Henderson, who argues that “[t]he events in her past - namely her own violation and the ensuing decision to take her daughter’s life - have become sources of both repression and obsession” (92).

children, to which Sethe responds with the destruction of the “property” to be claimed: she kills her baby daughter. From then on she is enslaved by the haunting memories and the belated impact of all the traumatic experiences she seeks to forget.¹

Sethe’s short happiness with her family and friends after her escape is “followed by eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life” (B 173). The community’s disfavor towards Sethe is grounded in what they interpreted as her “prideful” and “misdirected” behavior after she murdered her baby and went to prison (256). This deportment, however, can be explained in terms of trauma and seems to be a common reaction: “The survivor [of trauma] frequently resists mourning, not only out of fear [of not being able to stop grieving] but also out of pride. She may consciously refuse to grieve as a way of denying victory to the perpetrator” (Herman 188). Sethe did not want to be Schoolteacher’s victim again. “She was trying to outhurt the hurter,” Stamp Paid explains (B 234). Breaking down and mourning would have been synonymous to being defeated, and Sethe actually thinks she has won by killing her baby.

Despite her constant efforts to fight back the painful past, Sethe does not succeed, because “[a]trocities [...] refuse to be buried” (Herman 1). Psychologist Judith Lewis Herman asserts that “[e]qually as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work” (1). Because Sethe does not talk about her experience, “the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as [...] symptom[s], [...] such as feeling numb and reliving the event.”² Her memories are constantly there and the past is as real and immediate as the present: “The traumatic past in

¹ According to Cathy Caruth, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature — the way it was precisely not known in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4).

² “The psychological distress symptoms of traumatized people simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it. This is most apparent in the way traumatized people alternate between feeling numb and reliving the event” (Herman 1).

[...] Beloved [...] has not been forgotten, nor is it accessible only indirectly. It is strangely concrete, forcefully present, literally there, not past at all” (Morgenstern 103).

One fatal result of remembering too clearly the atrocities of slavery is Sethe’s rash reaction when Schoolteacher tracks her down to return her to Sweet Home: she tries to kill her children. In her eyes, it is an act of love. Sethe attempts to kill her children to prevent them from a life of slavery that would be “[f]ar worse” than death (B 251). This “most terrifying protection” of her children does not free Sethe from the past but leads to even more traumatic memories (Guth 587). She cannot forget because “the hurt [is] always there” (B 58). As a victim of trauma, Sethe is unable to discern the past from the present, and the memory of the day she killed her baby is so real and overwhelming that she believes it is happening again when Mr. Bodwin arrives at her house to pick up Denver for work. Sethe experiences a traumatic repetition, a reliving of the day Schoolteacher came to bring her back to Sweet Home: “He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing. [...] And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand” (262). This time, however, Sethe decides to kill the source of evil instead of its targets. In view of this incident, one can argue that Sethe is traumatized not only by her past experiences but also by having survived them. Caruth maintains that the story of trauma is “between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7).

Sethe struggles with her traumatic memories in her daily experience and “work[s] hard to remember as close as to nothing as was safe.” But her brain is “devious” and she has only partial control over her memory (B 6). The memories of her slave experience, her act of infanticide, and its consequences are haunting and inescapable. They return in unannounced flashbacks against her will — “there it was again” (4) - and are more vivid and real than anything around her at that moment. For instance, the recollection of how she “bought” the engraving on Beloved’s tombstone, “those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded

with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil” (5, emphasis mine).

Disrupting her determined attempt to forget, Sethe’s traumatic memories might surge at any moment and in any form, triggered by sensory perceptions in the present, such as sight, sound, or smell. For example, she vividly remembers the “shameless beauty” of the surroundings of Sweet Home despite the atrocities that happened there: “[S]uddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes [...]

¹remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the [lynched] boys. [...] and she could not forgive her memory for that. (6)

This could be viewed in terms of repression of the horrendous memories; she recalls only the beautiful images. Contrary to this argument, Sethe’s problem, as critic Jill Matus argues, is rather “[her] consciousness of the amorality of her memories, which refuse to obey her judgment of events at Sweet Home” (106). She does remember the gruesome occurrences and knows that they should efface the memories of the natural beauty of that place.

Although most of her past experiences are accessible in her memory, she avoids confronting them. She can only partially, talk about them because “[e]very thing in [her past life is] painful or lost,” and she and Baby Suggs have silently agreed on not talking about the “unspeakable” (B 58).² Therefore, her narrative of the past is fragmented; she tells only selected parts, as Denver reproachfully remarks: “You never told me all what happened. Just that they whipped you and you run off, pregnant. With me” (36). Sethe chooses to talk only about those few events that do not hurt too much when remembered and that are the most easily accessible, so “to

¹ Traumatic memory has been described as “a silent movie” (Herman 175), which appropriately characterizes what Sethe experiences at this moment.

² “Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud; this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*” (Herman 1)

Denver's inquiries Sethe [gives] short replies or rambling incomplete reveries" (58). Similarly to Paul D, who has shut down part of his head (41), Sethe simply does not "go inside" to avoid confronting things she cannot handle (46); "every mention of her past life hurt[s]" (58).

This keeps Sethe trapped in limbo between the past and the present: she can neither confront the past directly nor move on into the future: "To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (B 42), which is the only way to function in her everyday life. But this "continuous process of forgetting, refusal and evasion" of the past requires much of her energy and leaves her exhausted (Guth 585). Furthermore, "her rebellious brain" does not work the way she would like it to. It is "not interested in the future" but "loaded with the past and hungry for more" (B 70). Sethe almost despairs that her brain does not block out anything she sees or hears, even though she is already sated with painful memories (70). Her memories "[leave] her no room to imagine [...] the next day" (70). They have such an impact on her daily life that time does not move forward. Sethe does not even believe in the linearity of time: "It's so hard for me to believe in it [time]. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay" (35). Since she is overwhelmed by her memories and cannot cope with them, neither can she understand the concept of time, for "[m]emory and time are inseparably intertwined" (Ollila 16).¹ Living in a "no-time" (B 191), in a timeless existence, Sethe feels that "[t]oday is always here, [...] [t]omorrow, never" (60).

Sethe's traumatic experience of profound loss has forced her to focus entirely and almost obsessively on the protection and well-being of her remaining child, Denver. This concern even transcends death, because for her, past and present, life and death are the same: "I'll protect her while I'm alive and I'll protect her when I [ain't]" (B 45). Paul D considers Sethe's devotion problematic, even though at the time of his observation he has not

¹ "Memory is a crucial concept in the attempt to understand time, since the past is one of time's extensions. Time can be described as triple system, consisting of the past, the present, and the future; mankind operates constantly on the interface between these levels of time, so that the past and memory condition our perception of the present and our expectations of the future" (Ollila 16).

even learned of her infanticide: “For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love” (45). But for Sethe, her children are the best thing she has and she tries to hold on to them (251). Her overprotective attitude concerning Denver has also to do with the loss of her two boys and, unconsciously, with the loss of her own mother.

This leads us to an important observation: Sethe has repressed neither her memories of her violation nor those of her baby’s death, but those of the loss of her mother. As Sethe is telling Denver and Beloved about her life before Sweet Home and about her own mother, whom she can remember only very vaguely, in response to Beloved’s persistent questions and her insistence on talking about how she lost her mother, Sethe becomes suddenly aware of something she has repressed for all her life: “[S]he was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross” (B 61).

For the first time, Sethe considers the possibility that her mother was hanged because she tried to escape from slavery, which would mean that she left her baby, Sethe, behind. Unable to deal with the surfacing memories of her early childhood triggered by this new thought, Sethe reacts with indefinable anger and changes the topic. As Horvitz points out, “her memories of Ma’am are buried [...] because those recollections are inextricably woven with feelings of painful abandonment” (95). Unable to face the painful fact of her mother’s absence of her life, Sethe later on clearly rejects the idea of her mother deserting her because “nobody’s ma’am would run off and leave her daughter [...]” (B 203). But precisely “[w]hat Sethe cannot say — my mother deserted me - Beloved returns to say incessantly,” Morgenstern points out (114).

Only Beloved’s mysterious arrival eighteen years after “the Misery” (B 171), that is, the slaughter in the shed, forces Sethe to recall the past and to confront her painful memories. As Guth points out, “it is the resurrected past

- the actual presence of Beloved - that slowly summons memory in its wake” (585). In other words, “memory is materialized in Beloved’s reappearance [...]” (Henderson 91). In response to Beloved’s innocent curiosity, Sethe tells her more and more about her past. With Beloved, Sethe experiences a different kind of remembering than with Paul D, who has made recalling past events possible for the first time: “Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there [...]. But [with Beloved], she found herself wanting to, liking it. [...] it was an unexpected pleasure” (B 58).

After finally recognizing Beloved as her returned daughter, Sethe erroneously believes that now everything is fine and she can finally lay the past to rest: “I don’t have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all” (B 183). Her only concern is to make Beloved happy, anticipating every wish of hers, as if to make up for her death and to redeem herself. As they spend more time together, the two women become so absorbed with each other that “neither Sethe nor Beloved seem[...] to care what the next day might bring [...]” (245). They forget everything around them, including Denver, who takes care of them and of the household. This can be interpreted as a typical symptom of trauma: “As in acting out [trauma] in general, one possessed [...] by the past and reliving its traumatic scenes may be tragically incapable of acting responsibly or behaving in an ethical manner involving consideration for others as others” (LaCapra 28).

Not only do Sethe and Beloved become neglectful of and insensitive about everything but themselves, their relationship also becomes increasingly destructive for Sethe. Haunted by her own traumatic memories, Beloved becomes ever more accusing and domineering, invading her mother’s life while Sethe tries to explain how much she has suffered for her children. Sethe struggles to justify her behavior, that is, her act of infanticide and prove her love to Beloved. Eager to please and afraid of losing her, she follows her daughter’s every whim: “Anything [Beloved] wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire” (B 240). Yet Beloved cruelly keeps blaming her mother for abandoning her,

denying any reconciliation. Contrary to her hopes, Sethe must remember and explain everything to Beloved after she returns. The more she dwells on past events, the more disturbed she becomes and the more she loses herself in her own world. Finally, she is so possessed by a tyrannical Beloved — the personification of the past — that she loses her capacity to act independently and rationally. Sethe's situation can be described as follows:

[I]n trauma and in post-traumatic acting out [...] one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes - scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop. In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene. (LaCapra 21)

Locked into the past and “in a love that w[ears] everybody out” (B 243), “[...] Sethe's effort at explanation becomes not just interminable but life threatening” (Novak 208). “Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without murmur” (B 250). In the end, Sethe must be rescued from further damage by her youngest daughter, Denver.

But even before Beloved returns, Sethe's trauma manifests itself in bodily symptom; she feels her body disintegrating. For example, when Paul D tells Sethe that her husband witnessed her violation in the barn at Sweet Home, she feels compelled to “grip[...] her elbows as though to keep them from flying away” (B 68), and later on she wonders, “if [Paul D] bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?” (272). This feeling of disintegration is a typical symptom of trauma which symbolizes the lack of a cohesive sense of self resulting from the horror of her past experiences. The fragmentation of memory due to trauma inevitably results in a fragmentation of the self; memory is essential for the constitution of identity.

Another physical symptom of Sethe's trauma is the lack of sensation on her back; “her back skin had been dead for years” (B 18). As a result of being whipped, Sethe's back is covered with big scars in the shape of a

“chokecherry tree [with a] trunk, branches, and even leaves” (16), as the white girl, Amy, describes it. Paul D, in contrast to Amy, reads the tree as “a revolting clump of scars” (21). Scars are the memories of the body and “a metaphor for the violence suffered by the psyche” (Morgenstern 119). They are the silent, bodily expression of her physical and psychological trauma. As Cathy Caruth observes, “[trauma] is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality of a truth that is not otherwise available” (4). Since Sethe has never talked about that “truth,” the wounds have not really healed but just become overgrown with scars. Sethe’s tree of scars is always there, as is her pain too, but it remains invisible for her. “I’ve never seen it and never will” (B 16), Sethe regrets. She depends on others to interpret these traces on her back, this personal history inscribed into her body; it is important for Sethe to “learn to read herself— that is, to configure the history of her body’s text” and to find her own, meaningful interpretation of it (Henderson 87).

Sethe’s perception of color has also been affected by her trauma. After murdering and then burying her baby girl, seeing “red baby blood” and “pink gravestone chips” (B 39), Sethe “bec[omes] as color conscious as a hen” (38-39). She subconsciously refuses to perceive colors, as if to force herself to always remember the tombstone of her killed child. This lack of sensory and sensual perception illustrates Sethe’s determined attempts at resisting any kind of feelings in response to her trauma. The lack of sensation on her back symbolizes her numbness to the traumatic memories that haunt her. She almost mechanically remembers her painful experiences again and again but does not feel their impact anymore. For example, when she tells Paul D repeatedly, “And they took my milk” (17), she feels back in the past, compulsively reliving this devastating experience. Sethe talks about the event but not as a part of working through her trauma (LaCapra 90).¹ LaCapra points out that “[w]ords may be uttered but seem to repeat what was

¹ I am using the idea of “working through” trauma according to LaCapra’s definition: “When the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control

said then and function as speech acts wherein speech itself is possessed or haunted by the past and acts as a reenactment or an acting out [of the trauma]. (90) But even if Sethe may learn to overcome the haunts of her past, the scars on her back will always remain numb, silently testifying to her suffering.

PAUL D

Paul D's story and his appearance at 124 is central to the lives of the two women of the household. Not unlike Sethe, Paul D also reacts to his trauma in an extreme and deadly manner; he attempts to kill his slaveholder. "He didn't know exactly what prompted him to try [to kill him] — other than [his traumatic memories of] Halle, Sixo, Paul A, Paul F and Mister" (B 106). Paul D gets sent to a prison camp in Alfred, Georgia, where he begins to show first physical symptoms of the trauma experienced at Sweet Home. He starts to tremble uncontrollably but at first no one notices "because it beg[ins] inside" (106)

Only later does the trembling become externally perceptible: "[W]hen they shoved him into the box and dropped the cage door down [...] nothing could stop them or get their attention" (107). Only the monotonous daily work with the chain gang in the quarry can keep his body focused and still: "[T]here Paul D's hands disobeyed the furious rippling of his blood and paid attention" (108).

Paul D's experience in the chain gang symbolizes the connection between individual trauma and collective trauma as he describes the interdependence among the prisoners: "For one lost, all lost. The chain that held them would save all or none [...]" (B 110). After his escape from the chain gang the trembling disappears and he no longer feels his suffering immediately expressed through his body. Although his physical functions are indeed intact, he is left an emotional wreck with a heart as impenetrable as a rusted "tobacco tin" (72). All the devastation and humiliation suffered during his time at the plantation has taken away his dignity and identity. He has been so humiliated by the hit in his mouth that he was forced to wear after

his failed attempt to escape that even a rooster had more autonomy and was "better" "stronger," and "tougher" than him (72).

In order to survive he must forget the prison and "Halle's face and Sixo laughing," and, in so doing, he shuts down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helps him walk, eat, sleep and sing (B 41). But his memories of the horrors witnessed at Sweet Home and Alfred keep him restless (B 40).

His traumatic experiences haunt him and he literally keeps running away from the past. His solution is to repress his memories, to metaphorically lock them into the "tobacco tin," which used to be his heart, and to never release them: "It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, ... one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open" (B 113).

Paul D succeeds in repressing his painful memories of the past, in contrast to Sethe, who is unable to repress her traumatic memories and must deal with them every day. Paul D's attitude shows how much the slave experience is marked not only by the suffering of violence but also of loss: "The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one" (B 45).

This protective measure becomes Paul D's philosophy. After wandering through the country for seven years, restless and homeless, he has some love left and tries to settle down with Sethe, with whom he shares his past at Sweet Home. At first, it seems to be working out. He is "the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the woman cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could" (B 17). Women trust and confide in him and tell him personal things because he understands their sorrows and comforts them. But he cannot talk about his own pain and feelings, which are locked away in the "tin box" in his chest. The loss and devastation that he has suffered have made him numb: "[T]here was no red heart bright as

Mister's comb beating in him" (B 73).

It takes Paul D a while to realize that he has yet to confront and work through his past before he can build up a new life with Sethe. Beloved unwittingly initiates this process in Paul D when she forces him to touch her and have sex with her in the cold house. She moves him so much that his locked "tobacco tin," which is full of traumatic memories, breaks open and calls into presence his lost "red heart" (B 117).

Beloved has so much power over Paul D, it shames and humiliates him (B 126). He feels as if Beloved has robbed his manhood and despite his intentions to talk to Sethe about it, Paul D fails to break the spell Beloved has cast on him (B 127). Instead, he believes that all the problems could be solved if he and Sethe have a baby (B 128). But after all, Beloved defeats him and drives him out of 124.

It is not only the past — the story of Sethe's murderous act, symbolized by Beloved - which Paul D cannot handle, but also Sethe's attitude. Comparing her to the girl he knew eighteen years ago, he does not recognize her anymore and is scared of her: "This here Sethe was new. [...] This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw" (B 164), He thinks that her love is "too thick" and does not understand that for Sethe "[l]ove is or ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (B 164). He denounces her actions and insults her in a way that makes it impossible for him to stay at 124: "'You got two feet, Sethe, not four,' he said, and right then a forest sprang up between them [...]" (B 165). Before they can move on together, Paul D must learn to accept not only his own history but also Sethe's past in order to understand her.

Only after he has left 124 does Paul D feel the full impact of Beloved's unlocking of his traumatic repressed memories: "His tobacco tin, blown open, spilled contents that floated freely and made him their play and prey" (B 218). He cannot bear to confront these painful memories. Lonely and with "nothing else to hold on to" than a bottle of liquor (B 218), he is "plagued by the contents of the tobacco tin" (B 220), that is, haunted by the memories of Sweet Home. He realizes that he has merely repressed the past but not yet

faced it: “ Just when doubt, regret and every single unasked question was packed away, long after he believed he had willed himself into being, at the very time and place he wanted to take root - [Beloved] moved him” (B 221).

Not until the end of the novel, when “Beloved is truly gone” (B 263), does Paul D feel ready to work through his past and return to 124. He is able to leave his memories of Beloved behind, too: “Sifting daylight dissolves the memory [of Beloved and him in the cold house], turns it into dust motes floating in light. Paul D shuts the door” and closes this chapter of his life(264).

BELOVED

The circumstances of Beloved’s appearance, her general behavior, and her account of what she has experienced suggest that she is at once the bodily incarnation of the baby ghost chased off by Paul D and an escaped slave woman who has suffered the horrors of being transported on a slave ship across the ocean from Africa with thousands of other people. These experiences have traumatized her, and the memories of both her suffering and the loss of her mother during the Middle Passage haunt her.

Beloved’s accounts of her experiences keep Sethe and Denver in the dark about her identity. She cannot put into words her memories of the “unspeakable” things she has experienced: “[H]ow can I say things that are pictures” (B 210). Denver wonders, “if only she [...] knew enough about her” (B 118). Denver does not agree with her mother’s “speculations” that “[...] Beloved ha[s] been locked up by some white man for his own purposes, and never let out the door” (B 119).

Beloved’s recollections are incoherent, ambiguous and mostly unintelligible. Therefore, Sethe and Denver interpret them with the background of their own desires and expectations, taking Beloved’s recollections for accounts of the beyond. When Denver asks Beloved where she was before? Denver refers to her sister’s alleged death experience. In response, Beloved tells her about the slave ship: “Hot. Nothing to breathe

down there and no room to move in. [...] A lot of people is down there. Some is dead” (B 75).

The memories of what seems to be the horrors of the Middle Passage haunt Beloved and make her relive the traumatic experience in the present. “All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too” (210), Beloved complains. Like in Sethe’s case, not being able to distinguish between past and present is a typical reaction to trauma.

Similarly to Denver’s interpretations, which are greatly influenced by her own perspective, Sethe understands Beloved’s accounts only in relation to herself. She reads the marks on Beloved’s forehead as her fingernail prints “[f]rom when [she] held [the baby’s] head up, out in the shed” after she slit her throat (B 203), proving that Beloved is her resurrected daughter. As with Sethe’s back, Beloved’s scars on her forehead and throat testify to her physical and psychological suffering. Significantly, she has no other marks on her body but the scars; she has no lines on her hands and feet, which are “soft and new” like the skin of a newborn (B 52). The scars are her only defining features and are a constant reminder of her suffering. As James Berger puts it, Beloved becomes “a living scar who points toward the social and familial wounds” (207).

The scars convince Sethe of Beloved’s identity as her daughter. After some days of delusive happiness found in the unexpected reunion, Beloved’s traumatic memories become the source of anger, which she directs toward Sethe: “Beloved accused [Sethe] of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her” (B 241). She continually blames Sethe for abandoning her. The repeated loss of her mother clearly signifies the most traumatic event in Beloved’s life. This explains why she pitilessly refutes Sethe’s attempts at self-justification: “Beloved denied it. Sethe never came to her, never said a word to her, never smiled and worst of all never waved goodbye or even looked her way before running away from her” (B 242).

Beloved's blaming and descriptions of her traumatic encounters expose Sethe's own trauma, forcing her to relive her painful experiences. She searches through her memories of the time Beloved was a baby in order to find examples that will prove "that Beloved [i]s more important, mean[s] more to her than her own life" (B 242).

Beloved's trauma manifests itself not only in her anger but also in her fear of disintegration. With the loss of her mother, she has lost part of herself as well. She felt inseparable from her, as her fragmented memories reveal: "I am not separate from her [...] her face is my own [...]" (B 210). The loss of a tooth symbolizes Beloved's anxiety of dissolving completely: "Beloved looked at the tooth and thought [...] next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once" (B 133).

Beloved's identity is multiple and unstable; the novel intentionally leaves room for various answers to the puzzle of who Beloved is. At the end, an "insoluble ambiguity" remains (Rimmon-Kenan qtd. in Plasa 71). Krumholz calls Beloved "a trickster figure," representing "the irrationality of the world by defying definition and categorization, while at the same time participating in the novel as sister, daughter, lover, and finally, perhaps, mother" (117). This is also how the black community views Beloved when they go to 124 to exorcise it: "The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling [...]" (B 261). On a personal level, Beloved assumes all these different roles, according to the needs of the people who interact with her, and she cannot be reduced to just one of them. On a collective level, Beloved represents the traumatic past of the African-American people, standing for all the voiceless victims of slavery who lost their mothers during the Middle Passage or died while escaping from a cruel white master. The fact the Beloved has no name also supports the interpretation of Beloved as the symbol for the nameless "Sixty Million and more" to whom the novel is dedicated.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, multiple understandings of this ambiguous figure, I believe it is safe to claim that Beloved is at the same time Sethe's resurrected daughter and the embodiment of her (and other black people's) most traumatic memories of the past, thereby constantly reminding Sethe of her guilt. Rushdy even argues that "she is nothing but guilt, a symbol of an unrelenting criticism of the dehumanizing function of the institution of slavery" (Daughters 47). I would argue, however, that this view is too limiting and reductive; Beloved is most strongly characterized by her multifaceted and indeterminate identity.

Beloved is at once victimizer and victim: "As embodiment of the repressed past, she acts as an unconscious imp, stealing away the volition of the characters, and as a psychoanalytic urge, she pries open suppressed memories and emotions" (Krumholz 114).

Beloved's "fingernails c[an] open locks" (B 275), that is, she can gain access to people's personal and secret memories, hidden in rusted boxes, like Paul D's tobacco tin, which are not meant to be opened. In this way, Beloved forces both Sethe and Paul D to confront and work through their past. Furthermore, because of the suffering Beloved brings about, she is a catalyst for change in 124. If she had not appeared, Sethe would have continued a meaningless life in the isolation of her trauma, simultaneously cut off from and haunted by the past. But Beloved breaks up this stasis and, eventually, the deterioration of the situation at home forces Denver to go out to seek help. This reconnection with the community is the prerequisite for saving her mother and getting rid of the haunting past in the form of Beloved.

DENVER

Sethe's youngest daughter, Denver, suffers from the traumatic experiences of being imprisoned and witnessing her sister's murder, which she has not fully comprehended, not to mention worked through. The questions asked by her school friend, Nelson Lord, — "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?" (B 104) — make everything come back: "[T]he thing that leaped up in her

[...] had been lying there all along” (102). The trauma returns in the form of “certain odd and terrifying feelings” (102) and “monstrous and unmanageable dreams about Sethe” (103).¹

Denver cannot bear to hear her mother’s explanations about what exactly happened. (B 104). Denver prefers finding comfort in concentrating on the baby ghost haunting their house: “[I]t held all the anger, love and fear she didn’t know what to do with it” (103). This behavior is not surprising, as Herman explains, because “[w]hen trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living” (52). The ghost is all she has, because “[f]or twelve years, [...] there ha[ve] been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends” (12). Herman’s characterization of traumatized people accounts for Denver’s situation: “Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, [and] a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community [...]” (52).

Like all the main characters, Denver experiences the present “as an emptiness, as an unsatisfiable longing related to grief” (Novak 205). When Denver finally manages to gather “the courage to ask Nelson Lord’s question, she [can] not hear Sethe’s answer [...]” (B 103). Instead, she goes deaf for two years. With this physical response to the trauma of her sister’s death, Denver tries to ward off the pain. By shutting all sound out of her life, she blocks out the past as well, which has only just started to interest her.

She refuses to know anything about the past because she is “afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for [her] mother to kill [her] sister could happen again” (B 205). Despite her haunting fear of the past, she is aware of the necessity to confront it: “I need to know what that thing might be, but I don’t want to” (205). She solves this dilemma by not leaving the house again, since the world outside 124 represents the evil she attempts to

¹ Denver shows typical symptoms of trauma: “[T]rauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 11).

avoid (205).¹ Furthermore, Denver is also haunted by the “rememories” Sethe told her. They have caused in her such an immense fear of the past and the hostile “world outside the porch” that she does not leave the house for twelve years (249). Paradoxically, Denver isolates herself in a house that is haunted and occupied by the past. Far from being safe from the evils of the past, it becomes “full of spite” and “deliberate abuse” (104), from the moment on when Denver’s hearing comes back, “cut on by the sound of her dead sister trying to climb the stairs” (103-4).

Denver is traumatized not only by her fear of the past and her own mother but also by the unexpected loss of family members. “[...] Denver was lonely. All that leaving: first her brothers, then her grandmother - serious losses” (B 12). All of them have left her in a constant anxiety of losing her mother too and being left completely alone. When one day Beloved suddenly disappears during their play, seemingly abandoning Denver, her trauma expresses itself in the feeling of losing touch with her body: “[S]he does not know where her body stops, which part of her is an arm, a foot a knee. She feels like an ice cake torn away [...]. Breakable, meltable and cold” (123).

Similarly to Beloved, she feels the disintegration of her body and the loss of a sense of self: “Now she is crying because she has no self. [...] She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing” (123). Denver's sense of self depends on Beloved being present and recognizing her. She believes that her sister is all she has left and that she loves Beloved more than anything else. It is worth reiterating that not only Denver but also Sethe and Beloved fear the disintegration of their bodies. Throughout the novel, the characters’ feelings of bodily fragmentation point to a loss or absence of a sense of self as a consequence of traumatic experiences.

¹ This behavior is typical for trauma victims, as Herman points out: “Traumatic events destroy the victim’s fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation” (51).

As a result of her trauma and isolation, Denver lacks not only a firm sense of self but also social interaction skills, that is to say she never has the chance to relate to and interact with other people or co build her identity, living in a house that is haunted by ghosts and avoided by the community: “Solitude had made her secretive — self-manipulated. Years of haunting had dulled her in ways you wouldn’t believe either. The consequence was a timid but hard-headed daughter” (B 99).

3.2 TRAUMATIC “REMEMORY”

Besides, personal traumatic memories that represent a major haunting force in Morrison’s novel, traumatic rememories play a vital role as well. Beloved investigates the haunting impact of “rememory,” a kind of shared or collective traumatic memory. Even before the material return of the past in the form of the resurrected Beloved, Sethe is aware of the strong presence of the past in her life and of the danger posed by it. She suffers from the uncontrollable, flashback-like surfacing of traumatic memories into consciousness. She terms this symptom of her trauma “rememory.” It is something that imposes itself and possesses Sethe rather than something that she herself possesses. Sethe tries to offer resistance but “rememory is outside the reach of her control: a picture floating around out there outside my head. [...] the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there” (B 36). She understands it as past events that “continue to exist as objectified memory” (Furman 261). Ashraf Rushdy points out that the concept of “rememory” suggests that memory is not only a personal, subjective experience but exists also “as a shared communal property of friends, of family, of a people” (159). He adds that it must be experienced individually, first, before it becomes communal property (159). In this sense, a rememory is a kind of communal traumatic memory, accessible not only to the person who had the original experience but also to others, as Sethe informs Denver (B 36).

Understood in this way, the idea of rememory represents what Morgenstern describes in terms of collective trauma: “History as trauma belongs to no one, yet it is also shared; one can walk quite easily into

someone else's past" (111). Similarly, Caruth points out that "a trauma is never [...] one's own" (192), since it always also affects the people around the victim. Sethe's rememories pose a threat to Denver and she tries to protect her daughter from them: "[K]eeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered" (B 42). As Ferguson points out, "Sethe is both unconsciously and consciously guarding the territory of her memory, not only because it is a responsibility and a [...] terror for her, but because everything in it exists as 'rememory' and will never cease to be a threat to her children. (120)

Sethe therefore warns her daughter: "[I]f you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you" (B 36).

By describing the nature of a rememory, Sethe actually gives an account of her experience of being traumatized and of her response to it. Her haunting rememories are so real to her that she indeed believes the events will happen again. Sethe tries to keep Denver safe by telling her about rememories. But instead, her descriptions and warnings of rememories leave Denver profoundly disturbed and scared of the world outside their house. (B 244)

Sethe's trauma becomes Denver's trauma as well. Instead of telling her daughter the truth about the past, which Denver fears, she troubles her even more by talking about dangerous rememories. In this way, Sethe turns Denver into a secondary witness of her own trauma and passes on her trauma. A rememory becomes a shared trauma.

If the notion of rememory designates personal memory that becomes collective trauma, *Beloved* can be interpreted not only as the embodiment of Sethe's personal traumatic past but also as the personified rememory of the Middle Passage. She represents the traumatic memory of the slave ship experience and is at the same time haunted by it. Although *Beloved* acts as the mediator of these rememories, it remains ambiguous whether these events really occurred to her. Since rememories are accessible to anyone,

they can become haunting for anyone as well. The experience of the Middle Passage clearly represents a communal trauma and a central experience in the history of the African-American community and in the development of a shared sense of identity.

3.3 TRAUMATIC RECOUNTED MEMORIES

Traumatic recounted memories also exist in Morrison's novel. Denver's troubles caused by Sethe's memories demonstrate that somebody else's memories can be as haunting as one's own. Both Denver and her mother are haunted by the account of another person's memories. Paul D's recollection of his last encounter with her husband keeps invading Sethe's mind: "Now Halle's face between the butter press and the churn swelled larger and larger, crowding her eyes and making her head hurt" (B 86).¹ Sethe makes Paul D's memory her own instead of refusing it, so Sethe cannot banish from her mind the image of her husband gone crazy (70). Sethe realizes that Paul D's chasing away the baby ghost was a blessing, but in its place he brought another kind of haunting: 'Halle's face' (B 96).

These images in Sethe's head, created by Paul D's remembrance, are as vivid and unbearable as if Sethe had witnessed them herself: the "new pictures and old memories [...] [break] her heart" (B 95). The "brand-new sorrow" caused by the news about her husband is too much to bear (B 95). She comes to realize that she must give up denying and fighting the

the past and lay down "[h]er heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt [...]" (B 86), because the constant struggle is a "no way" of which she needs to "make a way out" (B 95).

Moreover, the whole community has experienced traumatic events, which have entered a shared, communal memory as people talk about them. Throughout the novel, the stories of suffering of anonymous black people, of

¹ Halle's reaction shows that he suffers from the trauma of having helplessly witnessed the abuse of his wife, hidden in the roof of the barn. The horrific incident has caused him to lose his mind, and the memory of the stolen milk keeps haunting him. Smearing milk in the form of butter on his face is his desperate way to express his pain.

“the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind” (B 92), are interwoven with those of the central characters in order to emphasize that Sethe, for example, represents only one out of the countless victims of slavery.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *Beloved* is a novel of trauma. It embodies personal trauma as Sethe’s resurrected dead baby and collective trauma as the representative of “Sixty Million and more” people who died during slavery and are “reaching out to the living, demanding to be remembered”. *Beloved* approaches the history of the South during the Civil War era and explores the effects of the past on the present. Hence, *Beloved* presents itself as the unfolding of a mystery, as an effort at historical investigation associated structurally and thematically with psychoanalytic recovery.

Beloved insists on the interconnection and interaction of personal and collective past. The analysis of *Beloved* conducted in this paper suggests that it would be interesting to further explore the problem of the past as a haunting force in Morrison’s novel that expresses an interest in the important influence of the past on the present.

The novel, also, insists that, although its characters are victims of the personal and collective trauma of slavery, they are responsible for their own lives. Accordingly, they must work through their memories of the past, despite the pain and sorrow entailed in this process. *Beloved*’s living presence demands that the past, in particular the traumatic slave experience, be remembered actively before being put to rest.

Because of their traumatic nature, past events in *Beloved* cannot be recalled and retold easily. The protagonists in *Beloved* must first learn to talk about their past: this is part of working through trauma and functions as a healing process. The horrors of the past must be retold to ensure that they are overcome and not repeated. Furthermore, an understanding of the communal and personal history attained through hearing and retelling the stories of the

past is essential to the process of forming an independent identity, as illustrated by Denver's story.

To put it in a nut shell, the ending of *Beloved* seems to suggest that at least the principal characters have successfully started to confront their traumatic personal memories of the past through the encounter with their memories' embodiment, *Beloved*. But whether the community has also adequately dealt with *Beloved*, or just forgotten her, like an unpleasant dream, remains uncertain. Despite the novel's insistence on the necessity of closure on a personal level, ambivalence towards history persists on a collective level embodied by the figure of *Beloved*, for her sudden disappearance remains ambiguous until the very end of the novel. Through *Beloved*'s story, it's maintained that in the context of the traumatic and traumatized past, no closure is ever available; history remains at once an irrecoverable loss and a perpetually open wound, that is to say although *Beloved* disappears, the logic of trauma that seems to inform this novel insists that nothing is forgotten.

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