

*A Web Case Book on BELOVED by Toni Morrison*

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Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Institutionalized Trauma,  
Selfhood, and Familial and Communal Structure

by Klay Baynar

Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved* is, in fact, a historical novel. It is based on a documented event involving fugitive slave, Margaret Garner, who was arrested for killing one of her children rather than returning her daughter to the dismal life of a slave. Readers might ask themselves why an African American woman would choose to focus her writing on a devastating act of violence within an African American family as opposed to focusing on the white aggression that ran rampant throughout the time period of the novel. However, by focusing *Beloved* on the infanticide committed by a newly freed black mother, Morrison is able to communicate a strong message, the importance of which spans from the Reconstruction era in the antebellum South to racially charged issues in modern America. Morrison implicitly shows throughout the novel that the psychological effects of slavery on the individual, as well as the whole slave community, were far more damaging than even the worst physical sufferings. In *Beloved*, Morrison uses symbolism to depict the atrocities of white oppression that caused the loss of African American humanity while also focusing on how the African American community came together to deal with the traumas of the past, thus reclaiming their selfhood.

The African American "veil" acts as a strong symbol of a white dominant society throughout the novel. During the Reconstruction era, black Americans were forced behind this "veil" that allowed them to only see themselves from the white man's point of view. Hofstra University's James Berger cites W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folks*, writing "...the American Negro, 'born with a veil...' can achieve 'no true self-consciousness' but can only 'see himself through the revelation of the other [i.e. white] world'" (410). Morrison herself recognizes this veil by noting "...that slaves narrators, 'shaping the experience to make it palatable' for white readers, dropped a 'veil' over 'their interior life'" (Rody 97). This "veil" represents the unyielding ideologies of white oppression that were exercised throughout the period of slavery and the

period of intense racial tension that followed the Civil War.

In *Beloved*, Morrison writes a false removal of this veil for both Sethe and Baby Suggs. This removal is foreshadowed by the imagery of the Book of Revelation (four horsemen) in the beginning of the infanticide chapter (Berger 409). When Sethe sees the “four horsemen” coming to retrieve her and her children and return them to slavery, Morrison reveals the thoughts of a black mother when faced with returning to slavery:

And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (Morrison 192)

Due to continuing white oppression after slavery, Sethe believed that the only way to make her children safe was through death. In killing her daughter, Sethe frees her from living a life of dehumanizing slavery. However, this act of violence did nothing to remove the veil.

What makes the infanticide a *false* removal of Sethe’s family from oppression is that the very event that was meant to remove the façade of “free and equal” blacks (infanticide) actually trapped Sethe’s family in a state where no subjective self could ever be achieved. This familial meltdown stopped history in its tracks. It forces Sethe and Denver into a repressive state in which past traumas are lost. When Denver finds out about that day, she becomes deaf and dumb, unwilling to face the horrible traumas of the past. Sethe represses any and all memories of the past, only allowing them to resurface with the appearance of Paul D and the expulsion of the ghost. Even Paul D has repressed memories, represented by his tobacco tin:

It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. (Morrison 133)

However, Sethe and her family were not the only people that fell victim to the “veil” of oppression.

White dominance also reappeared for Baby Suggs on the day of the infanticide. When “...they came in my yard” (Morrison 211), Baby Suggs realized that no African American is truly free. Not in a free state, not after slavery, not ever. Baby Suggs’s sense of self was “unmade” that day when she realized the freedom she thought she was living was false (Boudreau 460). Being a former slave herself, she understood the colonizing ideologies that slavery entailed. When she finally became free, she was able to claim her own humanity: “She couldn’t stop laughing. ‘My heart’s beating,’ she said. And it was true” (Morrison 166). In this part of the novel, Morrison shows that, for a formerly colonized people, a free identity is only obtained through decolonization.

The decolonization of the African American people required the retrieval of past traumas. In *In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life*, bell hooks writes that “decolonization...calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds” (183). So, the key to African American subjectivity lies in the past. This idea is explicitly shown when Paul D’s

tobacco tin, the item in which he locks away the past, bursts open. Sitting on the front steps of a church drinking liquor, “His tobacco tin, blown open, spilled contents that floated freely and made him their play and prey” (Morrison 258). The content that follows is all of Paul D’s memories. With his tobacco tin open, he is forced to face his past, finally able to free himself and move on towards the future.

“Rememory” in the novel explicates the idea that no trauma is ever one’s own, but are shared among groups of people. “Rememory” works as a collective way for a community to decolonize themselves (Elliot 183). Sethe explains rememory, saying that,

If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world...Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on...And you think it’s you thinking it up...But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. (Morrison 43)

A rememory is someone’s individual experience that hangs around like a picture. It can enter someone else’s rememory and complicate one’s consciousness and identity (Rody 101). Rememory is what connects the past with the present, realizing a collective memory that a community uses as a tool to help cope with past traumas. The collective management of these past traumas is best seen at the Clearing. “...Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child...took her great heart to the Clearing...laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up” (Morrison 103). Baby Suggs led the community in a therapy session of sorts in order to release bottled up emotions. The Clearing was a place in which the community could go and work through past experiences with the help of everyone, a place to deal with the past in order to love in the present and plan for the future. This idea is revisited at the end of the novel as well.

If *Beloved* represents the manifestation of the day of the infanticide, the day that 124 died and the visits to the Clearing ended, the end of the novel shows how the community comes together again to expel her from 124. Beloved and Sethe looked out the window and “...saw Denver sitting on the steps and beyond her, where the yard met the road, they saw the rapt faces of thirty neighborhood women. Some had their eyes closed; others looked at the hot cloudless sky” (Morrison 308). With this scene, Morrison expresses a positive example of African American communal unity.

*Beloved* is not a novel that is confined in meaning to the Reconstruction era. The publication of the Moynihan report in 1965 sparked a racial controversy regarding the dysfunctional nature of the African American family. Daniel Moynihan reported that “The family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown” (Moynihan). This report resulted in a political divide regarding race that lasted well into the 1980s:

The discourse of race in the 1980s, then, was constrained by a double denial: Reaganist conservatives denied American racism and descendants of the New Left denied any dysfunction within African American communities. (Berger 414)

Sethe’s family is certainly dysfunctional: A single mother working a low paying job who then

suffers a mental breakdown. Both of her sons ran away, never to be seen again. Sethe murdered one of her daughters and the other is incapable of leaving the yard. The family's dysfunction stems from their unwillingness to face the ghosts of past traumas. The historical parallel to this are the far right and far left ideologies of racial denial. *Beloved* represents racial violence in America, willing to return unless the systemic nature of racism is addressed. If traumas are repressed and not worked out, their effects will never go away.

The ending pages of the novel give the most powerful representation of the results of historical repression.

They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her... So in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise. (Morrison 323-324)

*Beloved* has again been repressed, forced to fade into the subconscious of everyone that had known her. Morrison uses this to parallel race in America. When *Beloved* was published, Reaganist conservatives denied American racism. Slavery is such a profound black mark in American history, it is better left forgotten; remembering would be unwise. However, if slavery and legal white oppression are allowed to be forgotten, there is nothing standing in the way of their return. Morrison creates a paradox with this idea. The final chapter's structure is set up with an initial couple paragraphs explaining that everyone eventually forgot about *Beloved*. Following these paragraphs was a sentence meant to justify the forgetting: "This is not a story to pass on" (Morrison 324). However, this line is a contradiction. The story that shouldn't have been passed on is a best-selling novel and is dedicated to "Sixty Million and more." By repressing a historical trauma, it is allowed to return. The very last word of the novel, "*Beloved*," attests to that claim. Especially when in regards to racism, "Only if traumas are remembered can they lose, gradually but never entirely, their traumatic effects (Berger 415).

Slave owning ideologies caused intense institutionalized trauma, the damage of which has lasted long after slavery was abolished. Indoctrinated with white ideas about how to view themselves, newly freed African Americans found the veil cast upon their identity difficult to cast aside. Dealing with the past traumas of slavery in a white dominant society required the effort of not only the individual, but also the African American community. Being able to reflect upon past traumas of oppression allowed the community and the individual to move towards a less traumatic future. However, the historical period in which Morrison wrote *Beloved* suggests that American society, both white and black, have forgotten how to manage the issue of race. Morrison's ideas concerning the "veil," rememory of trauma, and her portrayal of communal and familial structure exemplify the idea that the key to African American societal progression is the recognition of the past.

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