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Palimpsestuous Manifestations of Slavery-Inflicted Somatic and Psychological Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)

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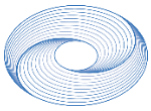
Abstract: This essay explores Toni Morrison's ability in *Beloved* (1987) to map out the often irrepresentable consequences of slavery-inflicted traumas on the survivors' bodies. In particular, *Beloved* discusses the inextricability of the physical and psychological element in the changing same of the African American condition in the U.S.A. With references to the Middle Passage, slave scar-branding, freed slaves' infanticide and inability to escape the vortex of somatic and psychological trauma, *Beloved* provokes its audience to reflect on the history of racism and slavery-inflicted trauma in the U.S.A. Morrison's fictional testimony may therefore be approached as a reparative attempt to American history by unveiling how the U.S. has always constituted a nation founded on systemic and systematic exclusion of African Americans who were continuously regarded as second-class citizens.



Upon entering the world of Morrison's *Beloved*, one may find themselves adrift into a postmodern condition realized by the confluence of several narratological conventions. Intentional linguistic fallacies, semantic vagueness, temporal malleability, and the blurring of literary genres coexist in an intricate interplay which in turn constructs a fluid and unfamiliar representation of reality. However, *Beloved*'s opening statement about the former slaves' family haunted house at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio, "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children" (3), constitutes a firm declaration of an individually experienced and communally understood predicament regarding the perpetually open wounds of slavery on personal and communal level. The tone is then set for a narrative about the debilitating

repercussions of experiences past. In *Beloved* these experiences relate to a palimpsest of slavery-related trauma. The trauma's everlasting, disrupting effects unearth, through atemporal personal insights, "rememories" pertaining to bodily and psychological functions but also through an intergenerational network of trauma survivors. Approaching the concept of trauma as a severely disruptive and slavery-inflicted event, usually outside the range of the usual human experience, that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organization and perception of the external world due to the intense fear, terror, and helplessness that the incident entails, my paper will attempt to delve into how the irrepresentability of somatic and psychological trauma is historized in *Beloved* and how trauma impacts one's perception of the world by forcibly converging past and present through the creation of an inescapable vortex of memory.

The novel evinces the sense of intense definite trauma caused by slave realities. Morrison addresses the physicality of African American intergenerational trauma by "rememorying," that is the involuntarily and trigger-sensitive process of physically and mentally re-experiencing a negatively definitive experience, and not just remembering, the inhumane and cruel treatment of enslaved Africans during and immediately after the transatlantic crossing which laid the foundation of racial relations in North America. In more detail, the European colonization of North America demanded vast amounts of physical labor and enslaving practices were employed as a result. Continuous, failing attempts to make use of the Indigenous presence for the construction of the developing American nation led to the invention of the triangular Atlantic slave trade with the hope that Africans would prove more physically resilient, or rather better able to undergo the extent of physical suffering of enslavement.[1] Morrison historicizes the Middle Passage through a reference to "Nan," (74) an enslaved African woman, who along with Sethe's mother, had survived the intercontinental,

[1] It should be noted that the characterization of Indigenous and African peoples here is not my own, but rather aims to represent the colonial mindset.

transatlantic voyage. Morrison's creation of this subtle reference to Nan aims to evoke the historical realities of all Western and Central African captives' endurance of the physical trauma of captivity, due to among many other sufferings, hand and/or leg fetters upon captivity in Africa, food deprivation, and the physically stretching transfer from the captives' inland homes to African ports and across the Atlantic to be sold as future slaves to cash crop plantations of European colonies in the Americas.

In more detail, the physical traumatization of the Middle Passage included but was not limited to the captives' bearing their iron fetters, physical pain from being packed and unable to move on board, frequent sexual abuse, the utterly unhygienic conditions of loose or tight-packer ships created by bodily emissions and decaying dead, as well as their scarifying slave-branding. All these for the several weeks that it took the ships to conduct the Middle Passage. Specifically, Sethe's most vivid recollection of her mother is linked to a discussion about the slave reality of scar-branding a distinctive mark on black skin to mark the enslaved person's enslavement, ownership and chattelization. Morrison writes "[Sethe's mother] lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This, […] I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead" (72). This identifying scar is directly linked to the Middle Passage as many slave traders would inflict the physical trauma of branding on their African captives either upon captivity in Africa or upon arrival to the New World. The emphasis on the physical scar's uniqueness and the two epigraph references to "sixty million and more" of "[Morrison's] people," that is fellow people of color, remind readers of the extent of the Middle Passage's physical suffering with a historical estimate of the crossing's death toll. Additionally, Morrison depicts the physical trauma of repeated sexual victimization during the Middle Passage by narrating that "[Nan and Sethe's mother] were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. '[Sethe's mother] threw them all away but [Sethe]. The one from the crew she threw away on the

island. Without names, she threw them. [Sethe] she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you." (74).

Furthermore, the weeks that the enslaved Africans spent on board of slave ships were regarded as a transitional phase in their enslavement and constituted a phase of profound psychological trauma that can be read as an inextricable extension of their physical suffering. The Middle Passage's in-betweenness is also "rememoried" by Morrison through Beloved's sudden physical appearance through water near 124 Bluestone Road, as well as by Beloved's confusion and inability to self-identify or recall her past. This simulates the voyage that Toni Morrison's own ancestors underwent from Western and Central Africa to the New World. Morrison's decision to depict the psychological traumas of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Middle Passage and its entailing realities comes from the realization that intergenerational African American trauma stands in the center of the U.S. national memory and history since the business of importing African captives spanned from the 16th century to 1808 and defined to a great extent the future of the developing the U.S. at the expense of enslaved African survivors and their descendants.

Moreover, Morrison's "rememory" does not fail to evoke the physical and psychological traumatization of slave conditioning, i.e., "seasoning," that new slaves underwent upon arrival to the New World to adjust to their enslaved condition and the realities of their geographical location. In detail, the end of the Middle Passage saw the beginning of an adjustment period enforced upon the enslaved survivors of the trans-Atlantic voyage by the slave traders and slaveholders. In the colonial context the term came to mean the physical acclimatization, through traumatization, of the enslaved person to the new climate, diet, geography, ecology, and diseases of the specific arrival point, but most importantly the arduous process of psychological initiation to the new social environment of strenuous labor regime, local customs, and language. According to Paige there was not a single method of seasoning enslaved Africans. Indeed, various methods were applied depending on the

geographic region of arrival to the New World, the nationality, and the personal tendencies of the slaveholder (763). The common denominator of all seasoning practices, however, was the inhumanity they displayed toward the enslaved individuals who were viewed and treated as property (Paige 763). In addition to that, seasoning was intended to make the enslaved aware of their condition and the necessary mannerisms of slavery, such as ways of conduct, to avoid the consequences of disobedience. In other words, it intended to forge the realization that the things which the new slaves were experiencing "were directed towards their Africanness" (Paige 763) and the fact that it was their blackness which set them apart for inhumane lifelong servitude. Enslaved Africans had then to accept their physical and mental shackles and lose, or better deny, their African sense of self (Paige 763). A reference to this forced erasure of African past and loss of African identity occurs through the fictional character of Nan and her African language. "[Nan] used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. [It was] the same language her ma'am spoke and would never come back" (74). Once again, Nan and Sethe finally being able to speak English attests to the psychological trauma of being forced to negate their African selfhood, hence freedom, and compromise into their new slave status. The physical survival of the seasoning process marked the end of the enslaved person's subjectivity and served the purpose of increasing the value, hence the final selling price, of enslaved Africans. According to Paige "seasoned" slaves, or "New Negroes" as they were often referred to, could attain a 57% higher price in the market than unseasoned, "new," "saltwater," or "outlandish," slaves. (793). Moreover, Morrison's reference to the distinctive slave clothing, that is Sethe's work sacking (70), may be read as an insinuation of the "osnaburgs, a type of clothing widely worn by enslaved people and made from tow, a coarse broken hemp or flax fiber" (Paige 764) granted to "New Negroes" to separate them from "saltwater" slaves.

Furthermore, *Beloved* not only alludes to the seasoning of Middle Passage survivors but also depicts the continuity of traumatic conditioning to slavery undergone by even slave-born characters. Morrison, constructing Sethe's mother's lynching, writes "by the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not, least of all me and I did look" (73) emphasizing not only the physical deformity of the lynched corpse but also its use as an intimidation practice to all witnessing slaves. Paul D's iron bit punishment, or Sixo's lynching serve the exact same cause. Similarly, while Halle's original family (sur)name which would mean to bear a connection with his ancestral lands in Africa, his African language and culture have been "seasoned" at an earlier stage of his family history, Halle is systematically seasoned spiritually, and emotionally into condoning his entrapment indefinitely although he has planned to escape. The reason for that seems to be the witnessing of his wife's violation by the schoolteacher's nephews. The psychological trauma of this experience is so impactful, both physically and mentally, that he goes mad, and refuses to escape presumably because of fearing the consequences of a possible failing. Hence, such fictional instances of systemic violence affirm and historicize slavery's systematic traumatization.

I further argue that Morrison's remembrance of the extent of slavery practices' psychological trauma is evident in the institutionalization of slavery portrayed in *Beloved*. Morrison's reference to "[one] getting money if [they] turned a runaway over" (90) alludes to U.S. Fugitive Slave Acts and historicizes the trauma it inflicted on runaway slaves by terminating their hope for physical freedom, hence, perpetuating the somatic and psychological traumatization of their chattelization. Specifically, Fugitive Slave Acts were passed by Congress both in 1793 and 1850 and provided for the seizure and return of runaway slaves who escaped from one state into another or into a U.S. federal territory. The 1793 Fugitive Slave Act authorized any federal district judge or circuit court judge, or any state magistrate, to decide finally and without a jury trial the status of an alleged fugitive slave. The measure met with strong opposition in the Northern states, some of which enacted personal-

liberty laws to hamper the execution of the federal law; these laws provided that fugitives who appealed an original decision against them were entitled to a jury trial. Starting in 1810 individual dissatisfaction with the fugitive law of 1793 had taken the form of systematic assistance rendered to black slaves escaping from the South to New England or Canada via the Underground Railroad. The demand from the South for more effective legislation resulted in the enactment of a second Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, nicknamed the "Bloodhound Bill" by the Abolitionists. Under this law fugitives could not testify on their own behalf, nor were they permitted a trial by jury. Heavy penalties were imposed upon federal marshals who refused to enforce the law or from whom a fugitive escaped; penalties were also imposed on individuals who helped slaves to escape. Therefore, the institutionalization of slavery further aggravated the African Americans' systematic traumatization.

Besides, this systemic traumatization due to the institutionalization of slavery abounds in *Beloved*. It is precisely the institutionalization of slavery that constitutes the driving force in the novel by serving as a trigger for and a justification of Sethe's infanticide and resulting trauma. Additionally, Morrison's depiction of Stamp Paid and Ella's involvement in the Underground Railroad, and particularly that of white abolitionists Mr. and Mrs. Bodwin, reveals the exigence of community action to negate the trauma-inflicting institutionalization of slavery by the Fugitive Slave Acts. However, ironically enough, Morrison's creation of the distasteful figurine which Denver sees in the Bodwins' house, portraying a slave and displaying the message "At Yo' Service," marks the limits and ironies of white involvement in the struggle for racial equality, and against institutionalized slavery. Similarly, the institution of "colored Thursdays" (Morrison 53) blatantly exposes the traumatizing hypocrisy in the implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment of 1865 which officially abolished slavery, but essentially initiated a period of the changing same for African Americans who during Reconstruction enjoyed only partial freedom and a second-class citizen status. Likewise, the mention of Ku Klux Klan (Morrison 79), that is organized nation-wide structures seeking to restore

white supremacy by violent acts of intimidation, affirms how the institutionalization of slavery is conducive to the continuation of African American trauma not only during Reconstruction, about which Morrison writes here, but throughout the twentieth century and until the present day.

Furthermore, I argue that the palimpsest of slavery-related trauma does not pause in 1865 with the Abolition of Slavery but lives through the realities of a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I hereby argue that the traumatic palimpsest due to slavery comprises two conceptual axes. The horizontal axis pertains to the historic continuity of the enslaved's exposure to the source of trauma, that is their dehumanization and chattelization prior to 1865 and sociopolitical subjugation post emancipation, whereas the vertical axis concerns the irrepresentable depth of suffering on physical, emotional, mental, and psychological levels. The simultaneous workings and overlapping of, in other words, the quantitative and qualitative axes may explain the existence of and inescapability from post-traumatic stress disorder. That is because PTSD is different from other conditions in the way that people who develop it start organizing their lives physically and psychologically around the trauma. Thus, it is the persistence of intrusive and distressing recollections, and not the direct experience of the traumatic event itself that drives the biological and psychological dimensions of post-traumatic stress disorder. After exposure to trauma, most people become preoccupied with the traumatic experience. Having involuntary intrusive memories is a common way of responding to dreadful experiences. This repeated replaying of upsetting memories serves the function of modifying the emotions associated with the trauma, and in most cases creates a tolerance for the content of the memories (Horowitz 124). However, what makes a traumatic experience more tragic is the victim's subjective assessment of the traumatic experience. In other words, the reality of the traumatic event is central to post-traumatic stress disorder, but it is the interpretation and the meaning which the victim attributes to the event which makes the traumatic experience more impactful and lingering. Even though the traumatic experience itself may have

ceased to exist in the past, the meaning which the victim attributes to the event constantly evolves in time. Though a tragic event may not seem stressful in its initial stage, the constant mental reworking of it, the unconscious "rememory" of it in Morrison's words, and its reinterpretation, would eventually add traumatic momentum to the experience.

In the "Black Hole of Trauma," Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane, identify six different aspects through which people assess the information about the traumatic experience they have suffered. Those aspects are: 1. they experience persistent intrusions of memories related to the trauma, which interfere with attending to other incoming information; 2. they sometimes compulsively expose themselves to situations reminiscent of the trauma; 3. they actively attempt to avoid specific triggers of trauma-related emotions, and experience a generalized numbing of responsiveness; 4. they lose the ability to modulate their physiological responses to stress in general, which leads to a decreased capacity to utilize bodily signals as guides for action; 5. they suffer from generalized problems with attention, distractibility, and stimulus discrimination; and 6. they have alterations in their psychological defence mechanisms and in personal identity. Using these points as a theoretical basis my analysis below will speak of the complexity of the post-traumatic stress disorder as Morrison captures it in *Beloved*.

In more detail, Morrison portrays the realities of the post-traumatic stress disorder through both the novel's duality in spatial and temporal dimensions and through its content. The events in the past are a significant cause of present events. Specifically, Sethe cannot erase the traumatic event of infanticide from her memory, and the guilt follows her even after the physical disassociation from the traumatic trigger. So much so that Morrison creates Beloved as the embodied reincarnation of the guilt that suffocates Sethe. The working of the post-traumatic stress disorder is explicit in Sethe's life as ordinary events become stimuli for the reappearance of the traumatic event. For example, when Sethe has an acute sensation for urinating (Morrison 61), this ordinary event becomes a

stimulus for the surfacing of the past traumatic event of giving birth to Denver while on the run from Gardner's Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky. On a different occasion, her petty thievery at the restaurant reminds her of Sixo's cleverly talking his way out of blame for stealing, which in turn launches a series of other traumatic memories about Sweet Home and slavery. However, the culmination of Sethe's post-traumatic stress disorder happens at the end of the novel when the village comes to exorcise 124 and mistakes Mr. Boldwin for the schoolmaster chasing her during their escapade from Sweet Home. For similar reasons, both Paul D and Denver repress their memories of the Sweet Home plantation or Georgia jail, and school days respectively. Therefore, these examples confirm Van der Kolk and McFarlane's observation that one serious complication of post-traumatic stress disorder that interferes with healing is that one particular event can activate other, long-forgotten memories of previous trauma.

Lastly, another diagnostic symptom for post-traumatic stress disorder is the compulsive exposure of some traumatized individuals to situations reminiscent of the trauma. In this re-enactment of the trauma, an individual may play the role of either victimizer or victim. The physical reappearance of Beloved [2]in the novel is the working of this principle as the entire family exposes themselves to the traumatic memory of the murdered child by refusing to move out of 124. This exposure torments every member of 124, the tobacco tin which contains the painful memories of Paul D is opened by Beloved, and Sethe obsessively attends to Beloved, even at the expense of her own health. The characters willingly expose themselves to the traumatic situation since their inability to evacuate themselves from it has made their trauma their personal norm. This is easily discernable by the end of the novel where Beloved seems to be thriving and is apparently pregnant, while Sethe looks unmistakably exhausted due to her reluctance to stop catering for Beloved. Lastly, it is this

[2] Here, Beloved is Morrison's -intentionally ambiguous- fictional personification of slavery-inflicted trauma and should not be mistaken with the novel's title.

very persistence of the trauma that has made Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs social recluses. Therefore, Morrison's traumatic vortex allows no way for trauma victims to escape it.

My contention in this essay has thus been, to explore how Morrison's powerful novel manages to breathe long after its last page is read in a similar manner that trauma's inescapability continues to haunt the bodies and souls of trauma survivors. The significance of *Beloved*, then, lies in the fact that thanks to its embrace of postmodern practices it manages to represent the irrepresentable and provoke its audience to reflect on the history as well as the extent of trauma inflicted by slavery. Morrison's fictional testimony may therefore be approached as a reparative attempt to American history by unveiling how the U.S. has always constituted a nation founded on institutionalized and systematic exclusion of African Americans who were continuously regarded as second-class citizens.

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