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## Introduction

Each slow turn of the world carries such disinherited ones to whom neither  
the past nor the future belongs.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to  
Orpheus*

Since the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in 1987, the multivalence of the character of Beloved has been the source of endless debate. Through polyvalence Morrison makes a political statement, suggesting that only through remembering and collective healing can the characters of *Beloved* recover from the physical and emotional abuse that slavery has imposed upon them. In the process, Toni Morrison offers the reader a view of a larger picture, telling contemporary Americans that the past needs to be revisited if black people, whose unacknowledged beginnings are rooted in slavery, are to come to terms with their identity.

*Beloved*'s complex identity is constructed as the combination of a supernatural, ghostly character, and as a slave girl who survives the ordeals of the Middle Passage. Consequently, critics tend to read the novel in various ways. Some lean toward a realistic reading of the novel while others are inclined to a more supernatural reading. Critics who adopt a psychoanalytical approach to *Beloved* include Jennifer Fitzgerald, May G. Henderson, and J. Brooks Bouson. Those who are more inclined to read the novel on postcolonial/historical/feminist terms are for example Gurleen Grewal, Sam Durrant, Satya Mohanty and Sally Keenan.

In an uncommonly negative review of *Beloved* from 1987, Stanley Crouch refers to the character of Sethe as, among other things, “the earth mother heroine who might be called Aunt Medea”, and calls the novel “a blackface holocaust novel” that “seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest”. Crouch, however, also calls *Beloved* Toni Morrison’s fourth novel, while it is in fact her fifth (Plasa).

Morrison bases her novel on a story that she came across when editing *The Black Book*, the story of a slave woman by the name of Margaret Garner who attempted to escape from her circumstances as a slave. When caught, she attempted to take her children’s lives. In Toni Morrison’s words “She was saying, ‘I’m a human being. These are my children. This script I am writing’” (Morrison: 1989 b). In *Beloved*, Sethe is the slave who dares to claim agency over her children, claiming her identity as a mother, asserting that her children belong to her, not the slaveholder (Grewal 97).

In this essay, the character of Beloved will be regarded as an embodiment of lost history and collective memory, come forward to be acknowledged. I will start with a discussion of slavery, as it is the institution of slavery that first and foremost affects all of the characters in the novel. In the second part of the essay, the concept of memory/“re-memory” is discussed, demonstrating how the struggle to disremember and keep the past at bay leads to the loss of identity in the various characters. Lastly, I will discuss Morrison’s emphasis on the healing effect of the community and on the importance of establishing an identity after being subjected to slavery; she depicts characters helping one another to bridge the gap between past and present in order for the community of ex-slaves to be able to envision a future.

# **1 The Discourse of Slavery**

The discussion of the institution of slavery in relation to *Beloved* is a vital element in this essay. Slavery and survival of slavery play an important part in the lives of the characters, even of those who do not have direct experience of it, but still have to suffer the consequences. Sethe does her best to “keep the past at bay”; she is representative in the way that she seems to be unwilling to deal with what has gone before. The impact can also be seen through the eyes of those who live in the community that surrounds Sethe and Denver, and is evident in the way that the characters react to and interact with one another. The horror of having been subjected to slavery is always there, unspoken and unresolved.

## **1.1 The Middle Passage**

In her discussion of *Beloved* that was published in the *Modern Fiction Studies*, Fitzgerald states, “The discourse of slavery privileges humanity, autonomy, and participation in a family – by denying these values to slaves” (670). Slavery had a devastating psychological effect on the people who experienced it. Most of the slaves who came to America went through the Middle Passage and those who survived the journey across the sea were sold as slaves when they reached their destination.

The Middle Passage was a triangular shaped journey that involved expeditions between Europe, Africa and the Americas/Caribbean. The slaves had to endure appalling conditions and many did not survive. When their destination was reached, the African American slaves were regarded as a commodity and treated as the Other by the white man. As put by Toni Morrison, “black people have to bear the brunt of everybody else’s contempt” (Morrison: 1989 a). Furthermore, the white man projected upon the slaves some of the negative aspects that he was unwilling to acknowledge in his own

race. As a result the slaves were looked at and treated like animals. Moreover, the abuse of slavery went on for generations:

Three hundred years [...] Now, that's not a war, that's generation after generation. And they were expendable [...] they had the status of good horses, and nobody wanted to kill their stock. And, of course, they had the advantage of reproducing without cost. (Morrison: 1989 a)

Thus, generations of people went through slavery and suffered as a consequence psychological, emotional and physical damage. This is the legacy of the African American. Furthermore, in writing the story of the people living on Bluestone Road, Toni Morrison is facing the forgotten, and in her terms, “veiled” past of the contemporary African American.

## **1.2 124 Bluestone Road**

In *Beloved*, slavery is depicted as a series of horrid and humiliating experiences, seen and mediated through the various characters. This experience leaves the individual without an identity and a tendency to bury memories in a “tobacco tin”. The opening lines of *Beloved* describe the current situation of 124 Bluestone Road in a straightforward way: “124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom” (Morrison, *Beloved* 3).

Sethe and her daughter Denver live alone, secluded from the community around them because of Sethe's act of infanticide; haunted by the spirit of Sethe's daughter, Beloved, whose throat was slit by her mother eighteen years earlier. Sethe is a former slave who managed to escape from slavery, with her children, but is in the present still a prisoner of her past – her years of enslavement. Furthermore, her form of resistance to the institution of slavery, her “too thick love” for her children and assumed pride, have brought her isolation from the people in the community. Sethe's attempt to “outhurt the hurter” by slicing the throat of her “crawling already?” baby girl has made her into a

woman that her own children are afraid of. Her two sons, Howard and Buglar, have eloped; her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, is dead, after pondering various ranges of color in her bed; and Denver has nightmares involving her mother. Sethe refuses to walk away from her circumstances and her transgression: “No more running – from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, [...] but [...] it cost too much” (Morrison, *Beloved* 15).

Sethe is, however, unable to directly confront her past and the responsibility for her daughter’s death: “every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; [...] the hurt was always there – like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left” (Morrison, *Beloved* 58). Taking her daughter’s life means gaining freedom for her children and herself, but she pays for that freedom with the death of Beloved. It is not until Paul D, a man from her past, appears on her doorstep that she is forced to cope with the repressed memories of her life during slavery and the effect that this experience has had on her after the fact. Paul D is one of the “Sweet Home men”, the male slaves at Sweet Home, where Sethe used to live as a slave before her escape and where she met and married her husband Halle.

### **1.3 Sethe**

Sethe is portrayed as a strong and wilful woman, “the one with iron eyes and backbone to match. [...] A face too still for comfort; [...] a mask with mercifully punched-out eyes. [...] her eyes did not pick up a flicker of light. [...] They were like two wells” (Morrison, *Beloved* 9). The way Sethe is portrayed is an indication of what she has been through, and her concern is mostly how not to remember: “she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious. [...]

The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard” (Morrison, *Beloved* 6). Schoolteacher’s two nephews assault Sethe shortly before the escape from Sweet Home. They take the milk from her breasts, milk that is there to feed her baby and when she tells Mrs. Garner that she has been assaulted the men punish her and use cowhide on her back. The scar Sethe has as a result is described as a tree and has left her completely numb on her back: “the sculpture her back had become, [...] like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display” (Morrison, *Beloved* 17). The scar is the one physical mark of slavery Sethe carries with her, representing the damage done to her when subjected to slavery at Sweet Home: “Sethe’s scarred back is a visible reminder of her traumatic abuse, both her physical violation and her psychic wounds, and it also concretizes her marked identity as the racially and stigmatized Other” (Bousoin 142).

The experience of being subjected to slavery and relegated to the status of the Other has left its mark on Sethe. Moreover, as a result of having been objectified and abused by Schoolteacher and his nephews, Sethe has yet to find a way to subjectivity, a way to a self she has never had. An example of Sethe as an object in the eyes of her enslavers is when she overhears them writing down her animal characteristics: “I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (Morrison, *Beloved* 193). Slaves are not believed to be fully human under the institution of slavery; they are supposed to work and breed like any other animal on a farm, and slave mothers are not thought to possess maternal instincts. This is something Sethe does not realize until this moment. She has been naive up to this point; wanting a ceremony when marrying her husband Halle, sewing her wedding dress from bits and pieces, thinking she can keep her children with her and live life as a family at Sweet Home: “Sethe had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to

that ‘somebody’ son who had fathered every one of her children. A blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted, lean on, as though Sweet Home really was one” (Morrison, *Beloved* 23). However, when she hears about her supposed animal characteristics, as compared to her human ones, she realizes that she is like any other slave; her children might be gone in the same way Baby Suggs’s children were sold and gone: “nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (Morrison, *Beloved* 23).

Furthermore, her conversation with Halle, before the escape from Sweet Home (Morrison, *Beloved* 196–97), makes her recognize that she and her children are considered property, and property means ownership; thus Schoolteacher can do what he likes with them: “Say it don’t pay to have my labor somewhere else while the boys is small. [...] The question now is, Who’s going to buy you out? Or me? Or her?” (Morrison, *Beloved* 196). Sethe wants her children out of slavery, and the conversation with Halle is what triggers her determination to escape. Sethe’s “too thick love” of her children and the fact that she is a human being, not an animal, lead to her pride and desire for a different life for her family: “No notebook for my babies and no measuring string neither” (Morrison, *Beloved* 198). Her children deserve to live life as free individuals, not being objectified by slaveholders, without a mother and a father to rely on.

#### **1.4 Motherhood**

Sethe’s own mother came from Africa, through the Middle Passage, but all that Sethe knows of her is the mark she had on her, the mark that portrayed her value as property. Sethe longs desperately for a sense of belonging, she wants to be her mother’s daughter: “Mark the mark on me too. [...] She slapped my face. [...] I didn’t understand it then.



Not till I had a mark of my own” (Morrison, *Beloved* 61). Thus, Sethe knows how it feels to not having a mother to call one’s own. Her sense of being is primarily defined by her role as a mother. In fact, she lacks an identity that is separate from her identity as a mother.

Mothers are deprived of the right to motherhood in slavery, however. But Sethe is unlike most slave women: she gives herself a right to an unquestioning love for her children – a love that is so strong that she would rather see her children dead in a quick and “easy” way than dying gradually, from the inside out, in slavery. Furthermore, when Paul D realises what she has done, having taken her “crawling already?” daughter’s life, he is stunned: “This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. [...] This here new Sethe didn’t know where the world stopped and she began. [...] more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed” (Morrison, *Beloved* 164).

Slaves guarded themselves and their emotions by not loving too deeply, people, children, even they themselves, might be gone the next day: “So you protected yourself and loved small. [...] A woman, a child, a brother – a big love like that would split you wide open” (Morrison, *Beloved* 162). There is a tendency in those who were subjected to slavery to do their best to feel less and avoid intimacy. In doing so, they stay clear of possible hurt, and this is evident in the relations between Sethe and Paul D.

### **1.5 Paul D**

When Paul D becomes a part of Sethe and Denver’s lives, Sethe is hoping that she can shift some of her responsibilities on to him: “What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else’s hands. [...] Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?” (Morrison, *Beloved* 18). When Paul D enters the house on 124 Bluestone Road he is

faced with a “pulsing red light” (Morrison, *Beloved* 9), which could indicate that Sethe has gone from one type of slavery to another. The red light could be interpreted as a sign of Sethe selling her body to survive, but could also simply mean that there is a ghostly presence in the house. The arrival of Paul D could signify that Sethe is now free from the need to sell herself, and as a result he may represent freedom for Sethe and Denver, or Paul D drives the ghost away, giving Sethe and Denver the freedom to perhaps live a life without the burden of a haunted house.

Paul D is described as a wandering man, restless, an individual who is incapable of settling down in one place. When he happens to knock on the door of 124 Bluestone Road, he tells Sethe: “I go anywhere these days. Anywhere they let me sit down” (Morrison, *Beloved* 7). Sethe invites him to stay and they become romantically involved fairly quickly. There is an attraction between them, but when they are through with the act of love making, they realize that they are not ready for each other: “Paul D saw the float of her breasts and disliked it, the spread-away, flat roundness of them that he could definitely live without, [...] And the wrought-iron maze he had explored in the kitchen [...] was in fact a revolting clump of scars” (Morrison, *Beloved* 21). Both Paul D and Sethe are trapped in the past, not ready for a future, and Paul D’s presence triggers Sethe’s remembering of Sweet Home, and the atrocities they went through as slaves.

Paul D’s appearance is portrayed as that of a man with: “Peachstone skin; straight-backed. [...] immobile face [...] The kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. [...] There was something blessed in his manner” (Morrison, *Beloved* 7 and 17). And this is precisely the effect he has on Sethe. Moreover, it is the combination of them finding each other after all these years and the-to-be presence of Beloved that aids Paul D and Sethe in finding a way to deal with their repressed memories of an unspeakable past.

Paul D's arrival marks the end of Beloved's presence as a ghost in the house. He drives her out, not realizing that by doing so he is forcing her to come forward in the flesh. Beloved is the one who triggers the remembering of Paul D's locked-away memories of slavery, abuse, and loss of manhood, releasing the rust of his "tobacco tin". The dog of the household, Here Boy, whom the spirit of Beloved had chased away earlier, returns to the house, convinced the ghost is gone. Beloved, however, appears in front of 124 Bluestone Road on a day that Paul D, Sethe and Denver have had the pleasure of feeling almost like a family at the carnival, not like the outsiders that they have all felt themselves to be: "They were not holding hands, but their shadows were. [...] Nobody noticed but Sethe and she stopped looking after she decided that it was a good sign. A life. Could be" (Morrison, *Beloved* 47). Sethe is hoping that there might be a way for them to become some sort of a family, to experience a normal way of life. Paul D and Sethe, however, need to face the past before they can embark upon a future as one.

Paul D's mind and body are filled with his experiences as a former slave and as a black man. His heart is even more filled up with horrid memories that he wants to keep buried in his "tobacco tin": "Paul D never worried about his little tobacco tin anymore. It was rusted shut" (Morrison, *Beloved* 116). When Beloved comes along "he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made [...] as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it" (Morrison, *Beloved* 117). In finding Sethe again, and in touching Beloved, even though he is unsure of why he does, Paul D, according to Fitzgerald, "moves from the position of object in the discourse of slavery to the position of subject in the discourse of masculinity", wanting and needing affirmation of his own manhood through his interactions with Sethe and Beloved (670).

At Sweet Home, Paul D and his fellow slaves feel they are looked at as human beings. Their owner, Mr. Garner, prides himself of owning only niggers who are men, not boys: “if you a man yourself, you’ll want your niggers to be men too” (Morrison, *Beloved* 10). Mr. Garner allows them to have some choices and even allows them to carry guns. But when Mr. Garner dies life changes drastically at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher and his nephews are brought by Mrs. Garner to manage the farm and Schoolteacher’s view of how to treat slaves is quite different from Mr. and Mrs. Garner’s point of view. Schoolteacher treats the slaves as commodity, allowing no choices at all. As in Sethe’s experience of Schoolteacher’s notes of animal characteristics, the men are seen as hardly human, perhaps more animal like, through the eyes of Schoolteacher. Their existence depended on their owner; Garner being alive meant everything, without him, all was lost. Paul D

grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. [...] It was schoolteacher who taught them otherwise. [...] they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. [...] One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race. (Morrison, *Beloved* 125)

While most men struggle with their sense of masculinity in their day to day lives, slaves had to deal with the sense of not being considered a part of the human race. When free the male ex-slave had to work through both aspects, his sense of self and his sense of masculinity. This is what Paul D has to deal with.

Paul D has been shaped by his experience of the bit, of being sold off, attempting escape from Brandywine to whom Schoolteacher sold him, and ending up in a chain gang, locked up in a box at night; submitted to sexual abuse, disguised as “breakfast”, along with his fellow prisoners in the mornings by white guards. His every attempt at escape has brought him back to being at the mercy of others, and gradually, Paul D’s heart shuts down, unwilling to feel, or comprehend his anguish and contempt. When

Paul D stumbles upon Sethe and her house on Bluestone Road, he has finally found someone with whom he can identify. Sethe is someone that he feels can share some of his burden with, and perhaps also be the one with whom he can have a future.

Beloved, however, appears in front of 124 Bluestone Road and in time it becomes clear that she wants Sethe for herself. It can be argued that the past has come back in the form of Beloved, and as such Beloved craves Sethe's full attention. Beloved begins by separating Sethe and Paul D by seducing Paul D. Furthermore, Beloved makes it clear in her interactions with Denver that Sethe is the one who Beloved wants, and needs.

## **1.6 Beloved**

Sethe and Denver welcome the arrival of Beloved and Sethe is touched by the fact that the girl bears the same name as her daughter: "Sethe was deeply touched by her sweet name; the remembrance of glittering headstone made her feel especially kindly toward her" (Morrison, *Beloved* 53). The characters have their different views on Beloved. Each of them sees her in their own way, seeing what they are ready to see and have a need to see, and observing different things about her.

All of them do, however, notice her voice: "her voice was so low and rough each one looked at the other two. They heard the voice first – later the name" (Morrison, *Beloved* 52). Paul D is attentive to the way she pronounces her name: "He recognized the careful enunciation of letters by those, like himself, who could not read but had memorized the letters of their name" (Morrison, *Beloved* 52). Through his experiences as a wandering man he knows better than to ask too many questions. Denver, on the other hand, is "shaking" and Beloved is to her a possible companion who has come forward, filling the place that her sister's death left empty. The arrival of Beloved marks the beginning of a journey to self-discovery and remembrance for Sethe and Paul D.

## 2 Memory

The deprivation of memory, a sense of identity and a family has left Beloved hungry for stories and for a feeling of belonging and in want of affirmation. Through Beloved, it can be argued that the unnamed bodies of the Middle Passage, the people who did not make it across, are validated and remembered: “Beloved connects us back with the dead and unremembered of the Middle Passage” (Mohanty 63). According to Wisker, *Beloved* is a politically focused novel, and Morrison uses the ambiguity of Beloved’s character to get her point across. She challenges African Americans to remember the past, no matter how horrid and awful it is, and Beloved’s character can be interpreted as a representation of that past.

Beloved is the element that triggers the process of remembering in the case of Sethe and Paul D, forcing them to come to terms with the atrocities of the past. In Sethe’s case Beloved demands the art of storytelling, forcing Sethe to remember and recall what has gone by, or as Heinze argues in her chapter on the supernatural element in *Beloved*: “Beloved’s raison d’etre is for Sethe to confront the guilt of her act and in that self-absolution find a future” (176). In Paul D’s case, though, she seems to trigger the release of emotions and memories that he thinks he has locked away for good in his heart.

### 2.1 A Fantasy

The past comes back to haunt the residence at 124 Bluestone Road in the form of Beloved, a survivor from a slave ship and a representative of the “black and angry dead”; the individuals the sea devoured in the journey across the deep from Africa to America, or Toni Morrison’s term, “the nation under the sea”. As is noted by Fitzgerald, Beloved is a ghost or a “fantasy object for the emotions of others” (673). As such she

functions as a vehicle for Sethe to work through the past, by allowing Sethe to partake in a fantasy, believing that this is in fact her deceased daughter, returned to her from the dead. Beloved has a scar under her chin that resembles the scar that would be left from the handsaw that Sethe used to cut her daughter's throat. However, if she is a survivor of the Middle Passage, the scar might be from the iron collar that the slaves were made to wear.

The character of Beloved is associated with water, perhaps a sign of the return of the unconscious, emerging from water, as if she has just been born: "A FULLY DRESSED woman walked out of the water. [...] Everything hurt but her lungs most of all. Sopping wet and breathing shallow she spent those hours trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids. [...] She had new skin, lineless and smooth" (Morrison, *Beloved* 50). Her description is in some ways that of a newborn baby, and she feels tired as if she has just been through a similarly difficult experience as that of a birth. Her "new" skin being "lineless and smooth", however suggests that she has undergone reincarnation. Sethe has to release herself of large quantities of water upon seeing Beloved for the first time, which points towards her rebirth into a potential future – a future that is made possible if Sethe manages to rid herself of the residue of her past. Sethe journeys through her "rememory", jointly with her lost "daughter" who has come back to her.

## **2.2 The Veil**

Up to the point of Beloved's appearance, Sethe has done her best to "keep the past at bay". Her idea of "rememory" is closely connected to memory, but implying that the memory lives on where the event took place: "Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. 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” (Morrison, *Beloved* 36). This passage suggests that the past can always be revisited, but caution must be taken so that occurrences, like the ones that went on at Sweet Home, are over, not to be repeated. Sethe, however, is incapable of facing her own past.

It is not until she has the support of Paul D in her life that she can put into words the event that made her feel as if “Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings” (Morrison, *Beloved* 163). Sethe’s instincts as a mother tell her she has to get her children to safety, when faced with Schoolteacher and his nephews, and she truly believes in the moment of her crime that she is doing what is best for her children:

if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. [...] 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, [...] where no one could hurt them. (Morrison, *Beloved* 163)

She does what a mother would possibly do when faced with the fact that her children are going to go through what she has been through, and what her fellow ex-slaves have experienced, sharing a collective memory with the people who have felt slavery on their own skin: ““It was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it”” (Morrison: 1989 b).

### **2.3 Freedom**

Sethe had “twenty-eight days [...] of unslaved life” (Morrison, *Beloved* 95); she has tasted how it feels to be free from Schoolteacher’s notes of “animal characteristics” and she will not have her children measured up as property. Sethe chooses a quick and “easy” physical death for her children, compared to the slow emotional death that slavery would bring them. Her actions, however, condemn her to a life of repressed



memories that are too painful to come to terms with, and her “brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day. [...] Other people went crazy, why couldn’t she?” (Morrison, *Beloved* 70). Thus, when Paul D tells her the fact that Halle witnessed the assault in the barn, with Halle being powerless to help her, Sethe’s brain is unable to work through another portion of painful information. Sethe is starting to have a need to face her atrocities and assume responsibility for her actions. As the white girl Amy Denver says when she is helping Sethe with her swollen and hurt feet in the forest, after Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home: “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (Morrison, *Beloved* 35). Sethe’s return to life signifies that she has to experience pain before she can feel and participate in the world of the living once more. Subsequently, Sethe has to come to terms with her Beloved, to enable herself and Denver to become members of their community once more, “re-membering” in both the collective and the individual sense.

Sethe, however, does not embark on the voyage to “a timeless present” until she notices the scar under Beloved’s chin and experiences “the click” followed by the humming of a song that Sethe believes she has made up for her children. If Beloved is, however, a survivor from a slave ship, the song might be an African lullaby that Sethe does not remember being taught and has called her own, as she remembers being taught some of her mother’s language. The African languages were a part of a heritage that most slaves went without, leaving them with no racial legacy to identify themselves with. Beloved’s arrival at Bluestone Road, together with Paul D’s arrival, initiates the beginning of Sethe’s journey to her inner self; the life of her psyche that she has worked hard to avoid: “Working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past” (Morrison, *Beloved* 73).

## 2.4 Pain and Regret

Denver believes early on that the young girl who has arrived is her “sister”, Beloved. There is evidence in the text that she is in fact the daughter and sister returned. The dog, Here Boy, disappears again and Denver is convinced “he won’t be back”. Furthermore, Denver has noticed the scar Beloved has under her chin, and she asks her: “What’s it like over there, where you were before? [...] Were you cold? [...] you see anybody? [...] Jesus? [...] Baby Suggs?” (Morrison, *Beloved* 75). The suggestion is that she believes Beloved has returned to them from the dead. Beloved, on the other hand, is fascinated with Sethe who gets “licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes” (Morrison, *Beloved* 57). One day Beloved asks Sethe, “Where your diamonds?” (Morrison, *Beloved* 58), as if they were part of the same past, sharing a collective memory, but could on the other hand be interpreted as the earrings of Beloved’s African mother, whom she lost on board the slave ship. Assuming that Beloved is a survivor from a slave ship, and a girl who loses her mother at sea, one can see that she has some things in common with Sethe. Sethe loses her mother when her mother attempts an escape from slavery, leaving Sethe behind, while Beloved loses her mother to the conditions on board a slave ship, her mother making the choice to leave her daughter, the iron collar, and her conditions, behind. Thus, without realising their similar conditions, they bond with each other in an exclusive, destructive relationship, which excludes Denver; Beloved sucks Sethe dry, while Sethe allows herself to be locked within a circle of guilt and regret.

Sethe accepts Beloved as a part of the household before she starts assuming that Beloved might be her daughter, come back to her. The first time Sethe has a feeling that Beloved might be her daughter is when she goes to the Clearing with Beloved and Denver. She has a feeling of knowing the fingers that soothe her neck after near strangulation: “Like a faint smell of burning that disappears when the fire is cut off or

the window opened for a breeze, the suspicion that the girl's touch was also exactly like the baby's ghost dissipated. [...] It was only a tiny disturbance anyway" (Morrison, *Beloved* 98–9). Sethe, however, ignores her intuition as she is excited to see Paul D, to start their life together: "The mind of him that knew her own. Her story was bearable because it was his as well – to tell, to refine and tell again. [...] On her mind was the supper she wanted to fix for Paul D [...] to launch her newer, stronger life with a tender man" (Morrison, *Beloved* 99). Beloved, however, wants Sethe for herself. She begins by moving Paul D out of the house: "she moved him [...] and Paul D didn't know how to stop it because it looked like he was moving himself" (Morrison, *Beloved* 114).

## 2.5 A Circle

It is not until after Paul D confronts Sethe with the paperclip that Stamp Paid shows him – a paperclip that tells the story of Sethe's act of infanticide, that Sethe hears "the click" and realizes Beloved might be her "daughter". In attempting to justify her actions eighteen years earlier to Paul D, Sethe "knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. [...] she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. [...] she could never explain" (Morrison, *Beloved* 163). Sethe believes that Paul D will relate to her love for her children. Paul D, however, feels that her love "is too thick" and thinks there might have been another way: "You got two feet, Sethe, not four, [...] a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet" (Morrison, *Beloved* 165). With Paul D's reaction, treating Sethe in a manner that reminds her of Schoolteacher's notes of animal characteristics, Sethe and Denver are left alone with Beloved. Sethe is now free to hear "the click", without the distraction of Paul D: "Beloved is the unresolved past that comes between them; for both Sethe and Paul D, she is the return of the repressed" (Grewal 109).

Paul D does not want to acknowledge his own past, and avoids doing so by denying Sethe's past: "How fast he had moved from his shame to hers" (Morrison, *Beloved* 165), leaving Sethe to fend for herself against the return of the repressed, come back in the form of Beloved. In the words of Rushdy, Beloved "is the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten; she symbolizes what must be reincarnated in order to be buried" (41).

Sethe hears the humming of Beloved: "I made that song up, [...] I made it up and sang it to my children. Nobody knows that song but me and my children" (Morrison, *Beloved* 176). At that moment Sethe is calm: "No milk spilled from her cup because her hand was not shaking. [...] She [...] looked at Beloved's profile" (Morrison, *Beloved* 175), ready to embrace Beloved as her "daughter". From that moment on Sethe and Beloved are inseparable, Sethe doing her best to make up for lost time and Beloved wanting more and more, never satisfied. Sethe believes she has her daughter's forgiveness now that she has come back from the dead, releasing her from the burden of "keeping the past at bay": "I don't have to remember nothing. I don't even have to explain. She understands it all" (Morrison, *Beloved* 183).

Beloved, in contrast, demands to be recognized. She wants the women at 124 Bluestone Road to acknowledge the existence of the people lost at sea, the millions of lives lost at the hands of slavery. Her being wants all, all she can get, acting as an incubus, which leads to a duel of sorts between Sethe and Beloved. Sethe does her best to make her "daughter" understand the motive behind her death, why she would not let anyone "dirty her best thing". Moreover, Sethe has a need for Beloved to know the reason why her mother would rather see her children dead than living their lives as objects in the eyes of people like Schoolteacher. She does not want her children to experience being milked in the barn as she was, subjected to the status of an animal,

having to succumb to the power of white people who can do what they please to their property. As a result Sethe becomes locked in a bond with her past, letting it suck her dry, almost to death. Now that she has her “daughter” back she can “sleep like the drowned, [...] She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine” (Morrison, *Beloved* 204).

## **2.6 Denver**

Denver, however, grows into the role of the caretaker. At first her trust, admiration and love lie on Beloved’s side; she will do what it takes so that she does not have to be without her again: “She will forgo the most violent of sunsets, stars as fat as dinner plates and all the blood of autumn and settle for the palest yellow if it comes from her Beloved” (Morrison, *Beloved* 121). Denver is afraid of her mother, that the side of her that made her murder her own daughter may show itself again at some point. This fear of her mother creates a want for Beloved’s safety, and she becomes protective of Beloved: “Denver was alarmed by the harm she thought Beloved planned for Sethe, [...] but [...] the choice between Sethe and Beloved was without conflict” (Morrison, *Beloved* 104). Denver seeks a self through Beloved, as Denver lacks a self. By indulging in the fantasy that Beloved, as her sister, has come back, she is willing to do what it takes to protect her from Sethe. Beloved is, however, not who Denver thinks she is, and as soon as Sethe begins to partake in the fantasy that her “daughter” has come back to her, Denver is locked out of the games that the other two are playing.

## **2.7 Remembering**

Once Sethe has reached the conclusion that the daughter she killed is now alive and grown, her thoughts flow freely, she can let go of the hold that is on her mind and soul,

understanding Beloved's return as one of forgiveness and reconciliation: "After the shed, I stopped. Now, in the morning, when I light the fire I mean to look out the window to see what the sun is doing to the day. [...] Now I know why Baby Suggs pondered color her last years" (Morrison, *Beloved* 201). Sethe sees the world in a different light, now that she is facing her repressed thoughts and fears, allowing herself to remember.

Beloved's side of the story is, however, quite different. Her story is told in fragments, in some parts without punctuation, to emphasise the trauma she has been through. From her point of view Sethe is the mother "that picked flowers, yellow flowers in the place before the crouching. [...] She was about to smile at me when the men without skin came and took us up into the sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea. Sethe went into the sea" (Morrison, *Beloved* 214). This passage indicates a past in a place with flowers, before the stay on a slave ship where they had to crouch with dozens of other slaves in the same situation. Beloved's view of Sethe going into the sea is an indication that the girl, Beloved, has transferred onto Sethe her own lack of a mother, her sense of trauma at losing her mother. In the same way, Sethe has a need to face her lost daughter in Beloved, so in turn Beloved embraces her mother in Sethe. Thus, Beloved gives herself complete freedom in casting the blame on her "mother", angry with her for leaving her – leaving her to her own devices.

It can be argued though that Beloved is also a representation of what millions of children, men and women had to go through: being torn away from their homes and families, cast on board slave ships, destined for the West – ships with human cargo for sale. Accordingly, the suppressed anger of the "nation under the sea" finds its outlet in the girl named Beloved.

## **2.8 Stamp Paid**

Stamp Paid, the man who rescued Denver from the hands of her mother eighteen years earlier, and as a result has a special connection to her, attempts to visit the house on Bluestone Road and hears “a roaring”. He feels responsible for the fact that Paul D disappears from the lives of Sethe and Denver, as he is the one who tells Paul D about Sethe’s act of infanticide, and wants to make things right. Stamp Paid, however, is the one who hears the voices – voices he cannot understand. But he has an understanding of the fact that the past has come back to haunt Sethe: “although he couldn’t cipher but one word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons” (Morrison, *Beloved* 181). The passage indicates that Beloved is in fact a representation of the “black and angry dead”, and the “roaring” goes on to play itself out in the words that are exchanged between the “trinity” (Grewal) of Sethe, Denver and the “ghost” of Sethe’s “daughter”.

## **2.9 “A timeless present”**

In the fragmented prose of *Beloved*, Sethe and Denver, they speak to one another, but past one another, without really hearing or understanding what the other one is saying. Beloved expresses her fears and sorrows in terms of a girl who was put on a slave ship, and lost her mother, where “men without skin” called her “beloved in the dark and bitch in the light” (Morrison, *Beloved* 241). But Sethe is too preoccupied explaining herself to her “daughter” and they speak past one another, hearing only the words they want, and need, to hear. Denver discusses the possible identity of Beloved with Paul D: “At times. At times I think she was – more” (Morrison, *Beloved* 266), expressing that in the eyes of Denver, Beloved is an ambiguous creature, perhaps her sister, and possibly “she was – more”. As time goes by, Denver watches her mother getting smaller and smaller,

while Beloved grows bigger and bigger: “Listless and sleepy with hunger Denver saw the flesh between her mother’s forefinger and thumb fade. [...] She saw themselves [...] locked in a love that wore everybody out” (Morrison, *Beloved* 242–43). Sethe is trapped in a “timeless present” and Denver realizes that she is the one who has to save her mother: “The job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved. [...] Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help” (Morrison, *Beloved* 243). Thus Denver, who started out as a young, insecure, protected girl, is the one who can put things in order by doing what she needs to do. Denver finds strength in herself, and through her interactions with Beloved she is discovering a self, an identity she was unaware of having (Fitzgerald).

Denver’s perception of the world outside Bluestone Road has up to this point been one of: “Where words could be spoken that would close you ears shut. Where, [...] feeling could overtake you and stick to you like a shadow. Out there where there were places in which things so bad happened that when you went near them it would happen again” (Morrison, *Beloved* 243–44). But Denver’s courageous nature and her love for her mother make it possible for her to “step off the edge of the world” (Morrison, *Beloved* 243), and approach the women in the community, asking for help. Denver is breaking down the wall of silence that has surrounded 124 Bluestone Road, and by doing so she is giving the people who have shunned them for eighteen years an opportunity to mend the gap between past and present; at the same time healing themselves as a community of survivors, in search for a new identity.



### **3 Bridging the Gap Between Past and Present**

This section of the essay will stress the importance of discussing communal healing and gathering in relation to *Beloved*. It is through the women in the community and the power of their prayers that Sethe is enabled to gain her freedom and release from the hold the past, mediated through Beloved, has on her. Moreover, the healing power of Baby Suggs, holy, can be felt in the women's approach to 124 Bluestone Road.

"The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind" (Morrison, *Beloved* 256).

#### **3.1 Baby Suggs**

Denver's grandmother, Baby Suggs, is at the center of the community of freed blacks on the other side of the Ohio River. She is supposedly a survivor of the Middle Passage, and experiences living in several places as a slave woman, before living at Sweet Home, having numerous children by various men. At Sweet Home, she is allowed to keep her youngest child, Halle, with her and is treated better than she has been before.

After Baby Suggs has spent sixty years of life in bondage, her son Halle manages to buy Baby Suggs her freedom. Baby Suggs gains her freedom late in life, and slavery has already claimed her identity: "the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home" (Morrison, *Beloved* 140). Baby Suggs crosses the Ohio River and feels for the first time in her life the taste of freedom: "And when she stepped foot on free ground she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn't; that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing like it in this world. It scared her" (Morrison, *Beloved* 141). Baby Suggs is for the first time feeling herself, what it is like to own herself, free from being subjected to role of the Other. What is more, she feels the physical effects of freedom:

“suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, ‘These hands belong to me. These *my* hands.’ Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing?”. (Morrison, *Beloved* 141)

Baby Suggs’s journey to an identity, a self, begins when she feels her body, having denied the existence of “this pounding thing” for a long time. Denouncing her body and her heart was necessary for her to survive the objectification she was subjected to during her enslavement. Furthermore, Baby Suggs’ deprivation of the agency of motherhood throughout her years of bondage has left her numb: “in all of Baby’s life, [...] men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized” (Morrison, *Beloved* 23).

Thus, hearing her heart beat for the first time gives her a mission in life, she becomes Baby Suggs, holy, in the community, helping others love every part of their body and in finding a heartbeat – a love every slave has been denied through the objectification of their self. The house on 124 Bluestone road becomes a “cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” (Morrison, *Beloved* 86–7), preaching in the Clearing, telling people that “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (Morrison, *Beloved* 88). Baby Suggs uses her heart to preach love and care to the people who want, and need, to hear it. However, after Sethe’s act of infanticide Baby Suggs’s heart breaks and the people in the community withdraw from Bluestone Road. Her last words are “Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed, [...] and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks” (Morrison, *Beloved* 89). Baby Suggs rejects the notion of the grace she

herself has preached to the people in the community, coming to terms with, and surrendering to the reality of slavery and oppression (Carmean). This is the Baby Suggs Denver hears when she decides to go out into the world, to save herself and her mother. Her grandmother gives her courage to go ahead, telling her there is no defense from the world of white people, but she should still go ahead and simply “Know it, and go on out the yard” (Morrison, *Beloved* 244).

Denver ventures outside the house on Bluestone Road and the first person she can think of to go and seek help from is Mrs. Jones. Mrs. Jones is a teacher in the community of blacks and someone Denver thinks very highly of. The people in the community awaken after years of slumber and realize that Sethe is perhaps one of them after all. The next step in Denver’s search for a solution to her situation is getting work and the Bodwins are the people who come to mind: “The Bodwins were most likely to help [...]. Once for Baby Suggs and once for her mother. Why not a third generation as well?” (Morrison, *Beloved* 252). Denver is looking out for herself and in finding her independence she finds a way to the sense of self and empowered subjectivity that have been missing from her life. She realizes that *Beloved* is a destructive force and that she needs to find a way for her mother out of the circle of pain and regret that shackles Sethe to *Beloved*.

### **3.2 Communal Healing**

The women in the community gather when they learn of Sethe’s situation, breaking the silence, bridging the gap between past and present through sound: “In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (Morrison, *Beloved* 259). One of the women in the community, Ella, is in the lead of the group of women who are willing to help Sethe, thinking that whatever Sethe has done in the past, she

“didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (Morrison, *Beloved* 256); having herself resisted the “breeding” factor of slavery in her own way when “[s]he had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by ‘the lowest yet.’ It lived five days never making a sound” (Morrison, *Beloved* 259).

Women living under the conditions that slavery enforces upon them are powerless, and in executing some kind of power over themselves, some of them reject mothering. As in the case of Sethe’s own mother: “She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away” (Morrison, *Beloved* 62). But she did not discard Sethe, as the man who fathered her was a black man that she put her arms around. As a result, the women in the community have a sense of collective memory, making it possible for them to have compassion for Sethe and her circumstances: “Morrison, then, engages our imaginations and emotions to show that common experience unites a group. Through the communal ‘gathering’ of individual experiences and memories, the group makes knowledge and meaning” (Ratliff). The community is what Sethe needs the most, and through communal healing she is released from the grip of the past.

When the women gather outside the house on Bluestone Road the healing power can be felt. Sethe feels as if “the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. [...] It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (Morrison, *Beloved* 261). The power of sound releases the hold that Sethe and Beloved have on each other, and when Mr. Bodwin comes up the road to transport Denver to his house for work, Sethe relives the event from eighteen years earlier and “hears wings. [...] Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth” (Morrison, *Beloved* 262). Sethe is convinced that

Mr. Bodwin is Schoolteacher come back for her and her children, but this time around however, Sethe sets out to “hurt the hurter” instead of attempting to “outhurt the hurter” eighteen years earlier. She re-lives the event at this moment and through the incident she is released from the hold that the past has on her.

Beloved though, feels left behind. She sees Sethe “running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again” (Morrison, *Beloved* 262). Her wish “to join” has been shattered, and as the women in the community gather around Sethe, offering her redemption, the past is dissolved in the disappearance of Beloved: “In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her away” (Morrison, *Beloved* 274). Beloved “erupts into her separate parts” because Sethe has released the hold she has had on what went before: “Beloved disappears, having served her function of ‘rememory’; the sound and fury is over, and spiteful, loud 124 is finally quiet” (Grewal 116).

## Conclusion

“I’m interested in the way in which the past affects the present and I think that if we understand a good deal more about history, we automatically understand a great deal more about contemporary life” (Morrison: 1998). In an interesting and intriguing, yet horrible, way, Toni Morrison has told the story of the slaves with no names through her character of Beloved, and demonstrated her mirroring effect on the psyche of the other characters. The “60 million or more” have been given an identity and a story through the narrative Morrison has constructed, a link between the past and the present. In acknowledging the nation under the sea and the forgotten story of the African American through the character of Beloved, the gap between past and present is lessened, and the cultural heritage is made more accessible to contemporary society.

By using the ambiguity of the character of Beloved in a calculated manner, Morrison manages to confuse the reader, and thereby Beloved functions as both a representation of every African American’s past and as a medium for the descendants of the slaves to face the repressed memory of their own story. According to Toni Morrison, *Beloved* “is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people won’t want to remember. I mean, it’s national amnesia” (Morrison: 1989a). This passage indicates the author’s intention to break through the state of “national amnesia” with her story of the African American slave that was never told.

But the journey of Sethe, Paul D and Denver to empowered subjectivity also has a wider application: they overcome their state of dispossession and gain full subjectivity by learning the lesson of self-love. They cannot really claim their individual selves and their collective identity as free individuals unless they face the past; yet eventually they must also leave their former identities behind, if they are to have any hope for the

possibility of a future, or self-possession in the present. The past can swallow an individual whole but through the support of others, communal healing is possible and the process of owning oneself can take place.

The past will always be there, as in Sethe's sense of "rememory": "Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there" (Morrison, *Beloved* 275). Anyone can revisit these footsteps that carry traces of the African American past and identify themselves with the past. The "disremembered and unaccounted for" are there, even though most people choose not to remember. Morrison is saying that the past needs to be revisited if the identity of the African American is to become whole.

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