

Morrison's Archeological Dig:
***Beloved* and the Toxic Stereotypes Surrounding Black Motherhood**

by

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SURROUNDING BLACK MOTHERHOOD

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The motif of the toxic traits or harsh attitudes that black mothers portray in Toni Morrison's novels shows how she is intrigued with the overall societal construction of motherhood—how a woman is supposed to operate in this role; how much she should love her children before it becomes “too thick” (*Beloved* 194); and how she “fails” as a mother if she does not support her children in the way society deems fit. These constricting forces and stereotypes passed down through generations from the time of Slavery (1619-1865) is the aspect Morrison is focusing on in the novel. Understanding her motives for writing such a novel and gaining an appreciation for her raw depictions of enslavement in the narrative are of particular interest throughout her works, but especially in the context of *Beloved*. In her expansive and lyrical prose composed in *Beloved*, Morrison continues the literary conversation of African enslavement in the United States by deconstructing the damaging effects stereotypes have on black mothers in contemporary society.

The first aspect that this thesis will cover is the background of *Beloved*. This will include the historical restoration of black history, especially the figure of Margaret Garner, a mother who escaped from the plantation she was enslaved on, and who murdered her one child to save them from the grips of Slavery. I will further this discussion by using foundational studies in critical race theory to explain Morrison's motivations for writing the novel. After this explanation of the history and theoretical conversation that Morrison engages with, I will explore *Beloved's* maternal figures: Nan, the woman who raised Sethe in the absence of her own mother working in the fields on the plantation, and Baby Suggs, another surrogate mother to Sethe. I will examine Baby's healing qualities and the powerful love she projects on to her community, along with her strong bond with Sethe. I will then analyze the maternal gothic space of the novel through the domestic sphere of 124 that is haunted by the baby ghost, and represents an expansive look at the

female gothic that includes the black experience. After the black gothic domestic sphere is analyzed, the thesis will conclude with Sethe, who is loosely based on Margaret Garner.

Sethe is a multifaceted character who represents a mother pushed to the breaking point because of the white racist society that enslaved her. I will focus on her relationship with her daughter, Denver through the concept of “rememory” that Morrison coins. This sense of generational trauma that Denver has inherited from her mother is the only guarantee Sethe can offer in a world that did not train her how to mother and also instilled the separation of black families during the time of Slavery. This thesis will conclude with Sethe’s relationship with Beloved, the dead child’s ghost that resurrects herself. Sethe’s unwillingness to diminish her guilt over the murder of the child and suppressing her emotions causes Beloved to thrive and become the embodiment of Sethe’s unresolved trauma. In this thesis, I hope to provide clarity into Morrison’s project of rediscovering black history, and deconstructing the roots of toxic narratives surrounding black motherhood by using *Beloved*’s maternal figures to explain these stereotypes.

The Black Book

Throughout her literary career, Toni Morrison was invested in the social project of restoring black history and discovering the roots of racism in the United States. The way in which she discovered this history was through the creation of *The Black Book*:

In 1974 Morrison took on a project called *The Black Book*, a collection of documents by African American people designed to deepen understanding of their history. While researching it Morrison came across the story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave from Kentucky who, when she was eventually caught in Cincinnati, attempted to kill her four

children rather than see them committed to slavery. She only succeeded in killing one: a daughter. The story was very high profile in the mid-nineteenth century and became a focus for abolitionists who used the case to foreground the horrors of slavery; years later it would become the inspiration for *Beloved*. (McDonald 11)

Through her innovation and constant inquiry into the lives of African Americans during and after Slavery, Morrison decided to delve into the history not covered in textbooks. The narratives that are present in history textbooks tend to focus on whiteness, thus displacing blackness in the margins of the texts. Morrison decided to take on the project of *The Black Book* to assist in historical revisionism to reset the focal point of history to black lives and narratives in order to encompass a more inclusive lens. In doing so, she discovered Margaret Garner, the inspiration for Sethe in *Beloved*. This is not to say that Morrison recreated Garner in a fictional format, but her story inspired Morrison to write a novel around a woman who committed infanticide, as Garner did. In this way, Morrison "...is calling for the recuperation of those silenced by history and that the form of this recuperation would have to be testimonial" (Christians 34); testimonial in the sense that the novel is raw and honest about the experiences of Africans enslaved on plantations and the brutal repercussions of this system.

Mammy Images and Welfare Queens: Racializing the Mother

During the latter half of the twentieth century when Morrison was writing her novels, there were plenty of disheartening attacks and hegemonic narratives oppressing racial minorities in the United States, including narratives of mothers. In the foundational work of critical race theory, Patricia Hill Collins lends her insight into systems of oppression that overlap and contribute to the social silencing of marginalized groups; the theory of intersectionality. According to Collins,

there is a long history of slander against black women in the United States spanning from the time of Slavery to the modern day. She develops terms that are valuable in analyzing *Beloved*, such as the mammy figure that contrasts the Cult of True Womanhood bestowed on white women, and the harmful stereotype of the “Welfare Queen,” developed by the Reagan administration, which opposes the matriarch figure in black households. Analyzing the mammy figure, Collins states:

The mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Regarding racial oppression, controlling images like the mammy aim to influence Black maternal behavior... By teaching Black children their assigned place in White power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression... Mammy is the public face that Whites expect Black women to assume for them. (73)

The inheritance of this racial hierarchy first develops in the domestic sphere as a defence mechanism in the form of racial subservience to the white populace. The lack of resistance thus internalizes the position of assimilation for black mothers—this is simply a mode of living meant as a survival tactic, but in Collins’ opinion, can be destructive to the self and the continuation of racial prejudice. She intersects the opposing forces of identity in this passage to show how multiple identities can be slandered simultaneously and cause a divide in personal esteem. This contrasts with the views meant to oppress white women in the Cult of True Womanhood that Collins describes as possessing “...four cardinal values: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Propertied women and those of the emerging middle class were encouraged to aspire to these values” (73). This way of subjugating white women in a patriarchal framework is meant to instruct them to be “empathetic” and “fragile” in order to love and nurture children. On

the opposite end of this spectrum, Collins offers up a counter narrative to this trope by establishing the mammy figure maintained for black women from the time of Slavery to present day domestic laborers:

By loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and ‘family’ better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her White ‘family,’ the mammy still knows her ‘place’ as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination. (73)

The mammy figure then functions as personal indoctrination into the racist society in which black women are placed. This selfless portrayal is ideal for a white racist power structure to enforce subjugation and instill internalized oppression in black lives. It is not a willing participation in this social sphere, but enables some resistance against a system that is harmful both mentally and physically for the black community.

The opposing viewpoints that Collins incorporates are embroiled in racist ideology toward black mothers. Collins posits that stereotypes such as the matriarch figure, or a black woman in complete control of her domestic sphere who acts the part of dictator on the homefront, and mothers on welfare, are two leading narratives oppressing black mothers. In terms of the matriarch, it functions from the standpoint of anger and wrath: “Aggressive, assertive women are penalized—they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine. The matriarch or overly strong Black woman has also been used to influence Black men’s understandings of Black masculinity” (77). This tool for oppressing black women works on the domestic level, whereas the mammy figure was socially based. Both are based on social interaction and the perpetuation of negative characteristics, but

the way in which the matriarch functions is to slander black women against their mothering tactics and techniques. This manipulation causes misunderstanding, even within the black community, as black men leave black women based on emasculation and distrust. The pitfall of this “domineering” attitude leaves black women alone and without the “purpose” of men to be there for them, thus informing the narrative of heterosexism peddled by a racist society, that the black community has assimilated into, enforcing marital bonds between people of the opposite sex. In this light, the matriarch has “failed” in her position to become the mammy figure that white society has deemed acceptable for her.

In another mode of oppression for black mothers, the term “Welfare Queen” develops from the government indoctrinating slander against black mothers on an economic basis. Collins states:

Creating the controlling image of the welfare mother and stigmatizing her as the cause of her own poverty and that of African-American communities shifts the angle of vision away from structural sources of poverty and blames the victims themselves. The image of the welfare mother thus provides ideological justification for the dominant group’s interest in limiting the fertility of Black mothers who are seen as producing too many economically unproductive children. (80)

In developing a mode of thinking that simply oppresses those on government assistance, this legitimizes the common racist ideology that *all* black mothers are poor and destitute, and are simply “feeding” off of the system of welfare. This manipulation of black women’s reproductive rights and overall civil rights as citizens shows how society has not made progressive steps away from the history of enslavement in this nation. This ideology shames black women for needing assistance in a society that has set barriers to prevent upward mobility, and controls them on the

basis of reproduction based on the fear of needing welfare and the perpetuation of having “economically unproductive children.”

Ultimately, Collins is thinking about binary oppositions in a racist society. She wishes to deconstruct the oppressive ideologies inherent in a society built to subjugate black lives and render them obsolete in a capitalist structure of constant production. As she notes:

Another basic idea concerns how binary thinking shapes understandings of human difference. In such thinking, difference is defined in oppositional terms. One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its ‘other.’ Whites and Blacks, males and females, thought and feeling are not complementary counterparts—they are fundamentally different entities related only through their definition as opposites. Feeling cannot be incorporated into thought or even function in conjunction with it because in binary oppositional thinking, feelings retards thought and values obscure facts. (70)

She relates these binaries back to the social othering involved in maintaining these oppressive forces. Race and gender, and other forms of difference, are socially constructed to pit individuals against each other to make a division between what lives are valuable and what lives can be thrown to the wayside of social acceptance. These ideologies are ingrained in the system that control our actions and thoughts to result in systems built to subjugate members of every group from opposing or dismantling these frameworks: “With domination based on difference forming an essential underpinning for this entire system of thought, these concepts invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression” (71). In this mode of thinking, we are products of the environment in which we live, and the only model of releasing our thoughts from these

oppositions is to analyze the binary institutions that we are products of. This entire framework established in critical race theory contextualizes the experiences of the black community, but more specifically black women, being stuck in stereotypes; there is no sense of closure away from them, and all lives revolve around the constricting forces these narratives assume. Collins' keen eye for societal oppression thus correlates to the project of writing for Toni Morrison because of the resistance narratives she produces.

Morrison's Mothers

What Morrison produces with her mother characters then is what Andrea O'Reilly calls "Mothering as Resistance," or the mode of mothering against institutional frameworks that wish to oppress black motherhood. O'Reilly states:

...whether to be conveyed against white supremacy or patriarchal motherhood — [Morrison] challenges the normative discourse of motherhood that configures mothering as simply and solely private and emotional. Motherhood in the dominant culture has frequently been regarded as the cause of women's oppression in patriarchal culture. Mothers are understood to be powerless and disempowered... Morrison developed the maternal standpoint of black mothers as ship and harbor, inn and trail, a standpoint that defines motherhood as a site of power for black women. From this position, black women seek to empower their children. (118)

Morrison writes as resistance to these structures—she places black lives at the forefront of her narratives, and shows how dynamic black motherhood is in a society indebted to the continuation of subjugating black lives and narratives. The way in which she does this in *Beloved* is different from her other novels because it takes a piece of history long forgotten by master narratives and

brings it to the forefront to be acknowledged on a larger scale. Taking the figure of Margaret Garner and expanding on the choiceless decision of killing one's child allows Morrison to engage in a conversation that began with objective narratives written by former enslaved Africans to formulate feeling and subjective meaning into her texts. As Kimberly Chabot Davis posits: "...although Morrison demystifies master historical narratives, she also wants to raise 'real' or authentic African American history in its place. She deconstructs while she reconstructs, tapping the well of African American 'presence'" (245). The project of *Beloved*, then, is not only produced by Morrison to *tell* readers about this piece of black history, but to *show* the lived experiences and emotions felt by all the black lives affected by the institution of Slavery and the vehement racism that still fuels the economic, political, and social landscape of the United States in contemporary society.

Motherhood in Morrison's work is an overlapping theme present in all of her novels and a prevalent topic of discussion. Her analysis of motherhood ranges from the social position of this role and what it means to the "white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 236) which permeates to the domestic sphere to micromanage the movements and thoughts of mothering. Yvette Christians expands on this concept and positions Morrison's writing as an act of witnessing; not witnessing the actual barbaric acts of Slavery, but envisioning them through a restorative, fictional lens. Christians claims that:

To the extent that it achieves the status of witnessing, it does so by drawing on the authority and the rhetorical forms of earlier genres associated with the work of witnessing. This association prompts some critics to read *Beloved* as a neo-slave narrative, for the novel partakes of an earlier testimonial and evidentiary genre (that of the slave narrative) in order to appear as a kind of witnessing to an event that is otherwise

distant from and inaccessible to both the writer and reader—who nonetheless inhabit the world marked by its effects. The levels on which *Beloved* can then be said to bear witness, in the sense of showing through speaking, are manifold. (31)

Although Morrison and her readers did not experience the cruelty of Slavery, through a fictional account of past events Morrison is able to reconstruct events and piece together the history of the black community that has been lost to white narratives. She does this, as Christians states, through “the sense of showing through speaking,” or presenting the material in the written text to translate to her readers for more widespread awareness of past events. Morrison then wishes to explain the current dealings that Collins is concerned with—how society was shaped around toxic narratives pertaining to marginalized groups—and the only way to do so is to go back through history; find all the narratives and documents and piece them together to create a portrait of the past. In developing the narrative of the past and bringing awareness to historical figures like Margaret Garner, Morrison is assisting in assessing the issue from the root of the problem and expanding her social imagination as far as it will reach. The project of *Beloved* is then an analysis of social constructs and the damaging effects they can have on black lives, especially black mothers.

In Morrison’s own words as a writer, it is her job to remember for those who are not able to—to provide a voice for those who do not have one because they were slaughtered in the Middle Passage and the plantations of the south—to be a witness on behalf of those who cannot relate their witnessing to readers. Morrison discusses the “veil” that must be drawn so readers can be socially aware of the history of the United States instead of burying it along with the dead. She states:

My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate.’ The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. Moving the veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant. Zora Neale Hurston said, ‘Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.’ These ‘memories within’ are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of those people. Only the act of imagination can help me. (“The Site of Memory” 71)

The “veil” she speaks of exists in autobiographies from African Americans who were once enslaved; the likes of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass—hence the line, “proceedings too terrible to relate” being the default explanation of emotions associated with cruel violence during Slavery for most nineteenth century writers. There is a disconnect between their objective narratives and the reader because of the need to reach the sympathy of abolitionists, but also the deep impact of trauma, although their narratives are stark and honest.

Morrison acknowledges that *Beloved*’s narrative must rely solely on recollections and the memories of others. She understands that there is the piece of the “interior life” that she will never gain, but through her writing, we can see Morrison’s attempt to relate the emotional strain and personal turmoil of Africans enslaved on plantations. It is then Morrison’s goal to address where the root of certain problems have originated, even if it is through fictional means. The fiction of her novels does not lessen the authenticity of the voices she establishes, but the brutal

force of their impact are effective in relating the history she wishes to bring to the surface of American society. It is through *Beloved* and the mothers in this novel that we can see Morrison at her best as she recreates history and explains the damaging narratives that continue to suppress the black community in the modern world.

Sethe's First Mother

The first mother introduced in the text is Nan, whom Sethe knew on the first plantation she lived on before Sweet Home. Nan travelled with Sethe's mother across the Middle Passage on their way to the United States and were brutalized by the ship's crew. The anonymous presence of Sethe's mother in the text—a mother who is a specter floating in the margins and whose only presence to Sethe is as a vision of a woman who works in the rice fields with a circled cross tattoo—creates a void that leads to Nan performing motherly intimacy. The narrator provides background into Sethe's past:

Nan was the one she knew best, who was around all day, who nursed babies, cooked, had one good arm and half of another... She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. '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. Without names, she threw them. You 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. I am telling you, small girl Sethe.' (*Beloved* 73-4)

Nan is completely transparent with Sethe about what happened to her and Sethe's mother on their passage to America; a passage beginning the chain of misery they would continue to endure as women enslaved on a plantation. Nan functions as what Collins refers to as the mammy in the

context of taking care of the white children of the plantation owners. These are some of Sethe's earliest memories, and they are full of the surrogate mothering of Nan and the plantation as the domestic sphere.

This exploitation of enslaved peoples shows the detrimental effects of capitalism based on consumptive means; Nan raised white babies that were not her own and Sethe's mother endured the harsh climate of field labor so the plantation would thrive (Collins 82). The part that is emphasized in Nan's conversation with Sethe is the fact that her mother "threw them all away but you," to show the unwanted pregnancies her mother had to endure and the subsequent murder of these children. There seems to be some sort of destined "plan" for Sethe since her mother happened to not murder her, but instead bestowed her with "the name of the black man" as a sign of kin and affection. This shows the love her mother has for her, even if Sethe does not have any personal association with her mother. This concept of motherhood for Sethe is one of uncertainty based on the lack of mothering her mother was able to provide for her, thus leaving her without any frame of reference to mother her own children later on in life. Nan is then the woman who steps into Sethe's life and makes her aware of her presence in the world and shapes her into the young girl who gets sold to the Garners at Sweet Home. She is not Sethe's biological mother, but she fills in the void that Sethe's own mother cannot fill based on her exploitation as a woman enslaved.

In "Living to Love," bell hooks explains the long and tumultuous history of love in the black community. She draws a line from Slavery to the present day, much like Collins, to show the development (or lack thereof) of affection developed in black households, specifically in reference to black mothers. hooks states:

Our collective difficulties with the art and act of loving began in the context of slavery. It should not shock us that a people who were forced to witness their young being sold away; their loved ones, companions, and comrades beaten beyond all recognition; a people who knew unrelenting grief, and the forced separation of family and kin; would emerge from the context of slavery wary of this thing called love. They knew firsthand that the conditions of slavery distorted and perverted the possibility that they would know love or be able to sustain such knowing... What form could love take in such a context, in a world where black folks never knew how long they might be together? Practicing love in the slave context could make one vulnerable to unbearable emotional pain. It was often easier for slaves to care for one another while being very mindful of the transitory nature of their intimacies. The social world of slavery encouraged black people to develop notions of intimacy connected to expedient practical reality. A slave who could not repress and contain emotion might not survive. (232)

hooks makes it clear in this passage that love is an unattainable goal for a people more concerned with living. In this context, there are no grounds for loving when a people is based on fighting for preservation. The dismantling of family units through the means of forced separation is one of the most detrimental factors in this equation—the selling of children from their mother, in particular. In Sethe's case, her mother supposedly lived on the same plantation, but she never interacted with her because of forced labor dividing the two, which is another tactic to break the human spirit from intimate connection. hooks asks the poignant question, "What form could love take in such a context, in a world where black folks never knew how long they might be together?" This model of transience fueled by uncertainty left enslaved Africans with no sense of hope or connection to their loved ones, which results in the continual pain of the black

community. This mode of survival relates to the act of mothering, especially in the context of *Beloved* as Sethe's mother becomes a ghost in her life—someone she knows is there but she cannot seem to reach emotionally or physically based on this mode of survival that hooks untangles. That is why it is so crucial for Nan to be in Sethe's life; she becomes a stand-in mother for Sethe so she does not fall into complete despair. hooks provides insight on a movement to shift the survival lifestyle of the black community where emotions are lacking, into a more progressive narrative toward feelings of love and togetherness. This survival tactic was passed down to the current generation of black people, which shows the longevity of Slavery based on the mindset established for divisional purposes. This push for love is quite similar to Morrison's project in writing *Beloved* as well because of the loss of children and parents during Slavery, and the lifelong journey through self-love that Sethe is battling with throughout the novel.

Baby Suggs and the “Clearing”

Baby Suggs also functions as another mother figure in Sethe's life once she runs from Sweet Home. Baby is the tragic mother of Slavery—a woman who was used only for reproductive means to produce more exploited laborers for brutal plantation owners, and saw almost all of them sold away. This was her “use” in this capitalist industrial project, or in O'Reilly's words, “woman as breeder”:

The ideology of black women as breeder produced and justified many of the horrific practices of slavery. The disruption of families through sale was rationalized by this ideology, as was the practice of forced pregnancy through studding or rape. This ideology also defined the very meaning of motherhood for black women and thus determined the

actual material conditions of their mothering. Slave women were defined as not-mothers and thus denied the right to mother their own children. Viewed only as breeders, slave women were separated from their own children and forced to work the fields or on behalf of the master's children... The discursive and material erasure of the slave women's motherlove served the economic interests of slavery and ensured its continual reproduction. (128)

As hooks asserts about the forced division of families, O'Reilly discusses how black women were used in this system as mechanisms for reproduction, especially through barbaric means of rape. She brings up a good point in this passage about enslaved mothers not having any ownership of their children, "Slave women were defined as not-mothers and thus denied the right to mother their own children." This correlates to Sethe's mother working in the rice fields and not being able to mother her children and Nan taking on the responsibility of surrogate mother to Sethe. This also pertains to Baby Suggs in the novel because out of her eight children, she only saw one, Halle, into adulthood. Baby was never given the chance to know her children or be a mother: "My firstborn. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember" (*Beloved* 6). It is interesting to note the random piece of memory that Baby has of her children summed up into one liking burnt bread, but the extremely disheartening quality of this fact. Baby at least provides the comfort that Sethe needs in order to maintain closer before the "four horseman came" to 124 (174). After the infanticide, Baby continues to support Sethe on her choiceless decision that she needed to make by explaining to Sethe why she needs to get rid of her grief and live past trauma: "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield" (101). Baby

Suggs acts as another mother figure who is important to the narrative of *Beloved* to call love into action the same way hooks does.

Not only does Baby Suggs act as a mother to Sethe in her time of need by providing unconditional support and love, but she also does this for the black community. The narrator follows Baby Suggs, holy (as she is deemed) to the space for emotional clarity that the community desperately needs, referred to as the “Clearing”: “When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place” (102). This protected space invites the reader into believing this is a maternal space—a comforting and secure area the likes of a fertile womb. It is out of the way from the rest of society so the community can have their own space without indoctrinating forces perverting it. In the Clearing, Baby Suggs, performs sermon-like speeches to community members she knows are in need of support, especially with regards to their internal esteem. She describes to them how they are valuable and worthy of love although they have been told a different narrative. Her speech declares:

Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them 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. ‘Here,’ she said, ‘in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do

they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!* And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. *You* got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you'... Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh. (103-4)

Baby deconstructs the people before her by using body parts (flesh, eyes, hands, mouth) the same way in which slave masters did. She wants them to reimagine these body parts and appreciate their use; instead of denoting each body part as tools for labor, to use them for enjoyment and self-fulfilment. Her words ring true to her audience because she urges them to "Love it hard," despite the white society lashing out against blackness and devaluing black lives any chance they can get. As hooks claims:

Given the politics of black life in this white-supremacist society, it makes sense that internalized racism and self-hate stand in the way of love. Systems of domination exploit folks best when they deprive us of our capacity to experience our own agency and alter

our ability to care and to love ourselves and others... we are a wounded people. Wounded in that part of ourselves that would know love, that would be loving. (231)

hooks makes similar claims in this passage as Baby does in the Clearing. There is no sense of self in the black community, so to love oneself is a radical notion. She states that black people are “wounded” and need healing, and Baby Suggs is doing this healing in the Clearing. This internalized oppression in the black community is the similarity between hooks and Baby because they want to abolish this belief and replace it with a narrative full of love and support. For instance, Baby always pits each phrase of love against what white society does to black lives outside of the Clearing, which is what hooks points out in this passage of the self slowly disintegrating in the face of indoctrination; it is easier to enslave a population that does not possess self-love or love for one another. The people in the Clearing are indeed “wounded” in the way hooks mentions—they need a value system based on personal wants and desires instead of the labor that they have been forced to participate in. This narrative is revolutionary because of the continued assumption that black lives hold no value in a society that calls for the brutalization and bondage of black people. In this way, Baby functions as the “ancestor” figure present in Morrison’s work based on her “benevolent, instructive, and protective,” persona, as well as, “[providing] a certain kind of wisdom” (“Rootedness” 61-2). She wants to pass down what she has learned about nurturing the self and loving others around her from years of pain caused by the forced separation of her children during Slavery. The Clearing is her area to then “clear” her soul and others around her; to provide a safe area to reflect and to love.

Baby Suggs validates her community members’ experiences and makes them feel whole, where at one time they felt as though their only value was in laid in their hands that could produce forced labor. She provides the closure of a mother’s love over the people she cares for

and the community she is a part of, thus producing the desired communal push that hooks would appreciate. Her project of uplifting her community is a strong sense of self that Morrison wants her readers of color to absorb; that they are valued and loved. In Morrison's own words, this is her way of translating this theme of love and mothering to her readers in the form of the novel:

We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is in the novel... It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe... One of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well... I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance, as it is in these other art forms that I have described. ("Rootedness" 59)

Through this speech that Baby Suggs delivers, Morrison can address these "conflicts" and "problems" to her readers. She wants to bring the story to all of her readers in a way to explore the oral history of black culture as Baby does in the Clearing, while also being enlightening in the written form of the novel. This form can be either read out loud in the experience of the oral history that it is indebted to, but also read silently to form an internal monologue. Morrison raises these points for the reader to consider and furthers the conversation into the direction of self-love and the importance of wholeness in community.

This narrative can also be framed into a modern context based on the continual denigration of the black community that Morrison lived through during her lifetime, and such scholars like Collins and hooks focus their research around. Morrison provides “the places and spaces so that the reader can participate” in this Clearing with Baby Suggs so there can be introspective conversations and enlightened thinking emanating from the page, as well as the communal togetherness of her audience members. The way in which Morrison does this so effectively is through Baby citing the racist society that has caused this self-loathing in the black community and damaged them through Slavery. Opening these conversations in the text shows Morrison’s engagement with her social surroundings and the objective for this novel; to expose the constructs in place that have prevented the betterment and self-fulfilment of the black community. She ultimately wants to get down to the root of the issue and discuss the social and personal ramifications of Slavery, and she does so through the tragic narrative of Baby Suggs coming to terms with self-love and the love of her community, even if it is short-lived. Baby Suggs, the surrogate mother to Sethe and her community, thus acts as the voice of these concerns and the push for a future of resistance against toxic narratives that subjugate black people.

124 and the Female Gothic

The domestic sphere in the novel is the central location of motherhood post-Slavery, but also the place of pain for all of the characters. Morrison takes the historically “maternal” area of the house and transforms, or queers, the view of it. She begins *Beloved* by writing: “124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s venom” (3). The house is “spiteful,” taking on a human characteristic, thus becoming a character in the novel. This is where all of the “action” takes place: the crawling-already? baby is murdered in the shed outside the house; Sethe’s guilt worsens as she is

haunted by the baby ghost; and ultimately where Beloved sucks the life force out of Sethe to embody her traumatic past she is unwilling to face.

Morrison wants the focal point to be on the house because of its long history within the context of the Cult of True Womanhood, and its appearance in the gothic tradition of the western canon; but also to begin the conversation about the haunting past most enslaved people faced after they were freed from bondage. This haunted past can be immediately identified by the loss of the number three within the address “124,” symbolizing the crawling-already? baby (Beloved) being removed from the family structure. This “haunted house” attribute shows Morrison’s understanding of the classic tropes of the female gothic being contained on the homefront and the bonds of domesticity, but shifting the angle to include a black mother’s narrative. The house is haunted by the daughter who was murdered years ago, but also by the long forgotten spirits of dead Africans lingering in every space of American narratives, especially within the gothic tradition. A sense of guilt is reckoned by the white population as the dark history of Slavery looms in the distance that they have neglected to discuss or provide reparations for.

Beloved’s ghost is then the long history of this tradition, as she relates to Denver that she felt “small in that place” and it was “Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in,” before she got to the “bridge” that allowed her to rise into the world of the living (88). This “place” is most likely the state of limbo that Beloved was thrown into along with the other African lives mercilessly slaughtered during the Middle Passage and on plantations. She is cramped among the dead and her soul cannot ascend based on the literal sense that her spirit never fully moved on, hence her continued haunting of 124, but also because history moved along without acknowledging the horrors of Slavery—in this case, none of these souls are at ease. This all adds to the house as a place of trauma and pain from Sethe’s act of infanticide, but

also from the long history of neglecting the truth of Slavery. The haunting of 124 and the family's unrelenting torture from past events shows the extent of Sethe's love for her children as she made sacrifices to protect them. Beloved's haunting is then a way for the dead and the living to connect in a generational sense:

The violence, which causes Beloved's haunting, comes from a problematic place of maternal love and opens a permeable space between the living and the dead... I believe that Beloved functions in the text as a spectral bridge that conveys historical and cultural information from Sethe to her remaining daughter, Denver: she is a vital connection between generations. Beloved's presence in the text as 'spectral history' and her resulting 'Spectrality Effect' help Denver 'learn to live' and to respect her mother as well.

(Anderson 68)

Melanie R. Anderson provides keen insight in relation to Beloved being a sort of "ancestor" figure, the likes of Baby Suggs, as far as the instructional tool is concerned, by connecting both Sethe and Denver. I do not think Beloved's presence is there so Denver can "respect her mother," but instead, to understand and empathize with her mother's past as she is unaware of the infanticide because of Sethe's reluctance to disclose that information. Anderson's argument is interesting in observing the function of the household and Beloved's presence in it, however. She situates her argument around Beloved's haunting presence to Sethe's mothering tactics to save her children from the bonds of slavery, while also arguing for Beloved to be seen as the connection between the long forgotten black lives lost during enslavement and the living who are willing to forget this past.

Rememory

This history can be translated into the concept of “Rememory” that Sethe shares with Denver.

Regarding the generational trauma being passed down to Denver, Sethe claims:

‘I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. 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. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside of my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened’ ... ‘So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you. That’s how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what’ ... [Denver] ‘If it’s still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies’ ... [Sethe] ‘Nothing ever does.’ (43-4)

Sethe discloses her feelings associated with memory and the past within this term of “rememory” to show how some things never pass on spiritually and linger, just like the memories in her head. She is placed in another form of limbo like *Beloved*, except in the form of trauma that comes back to her sporadically throughout the text; hence the nonlinear timeline of the novel. She states “What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside of my head,” to relate the feeling of having something torturing her that exists somewhere else outside of herself and where she is; something that is still functioning, or at least operating and fully realized inside her head where it is still alive. She uses the image of the “burning house” to translate these thoughts—although it might be physically gone from the world, it is still alive in her memories and imagination. That is

why she says that nothing ever dies because it still has a place inside the thoughts of those it influenced. She urges Denver to never go there “Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you,” because of the function of generational trauma that Denver has inherited from Sethe. Even if Sweet Home burned down, there would still be memories that Denver would gain from Sethe biologically that could then haunt her once she stepped foot back on the ground it once stood on.

This revelatory passage is groundbreaking to the lineage of Slavery and the inheritance of grief from previous generations as a sort of warning against areas or places that provoke pain. Anderson expands this theory of rememory when she states: “For Sethe the past haunts and hurts, and death is no certain release from the haunting, since she is already caught in a traumatic, temporal limbo. Furthermore, she unwittingly cuts herself off from Denver by giving incomplete explanations of the danger of experiencing past horrors” (67). Sethe is caught in a state of constant despair over murdering her child from the damaging hands of Slavery, and does not wish this same existence for her daughter. Her memories, and the house, are areas where her constant state of guilt and trauma fully embody themselves in order to continue the self-torment Sethe puts herself through. Sethe’s relation to memory and trauma is another way for Morrison to grapple with an element that is rooted in the black community based on the trauma linking the generations:

How I gain access to that interior life is what drives me... It’s a kind of literary archeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the

image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. (“The Site of Memory” 71)

To discover the “interior life,” Morrison has looked inward to Sethe’s psyche. Sethe is worried about Denver being traumatized in a similar fashion that she endured at Sweet Home, which shows a continued problem that Morrison is interested in discovering. That is why she uses the term “archeology” to discuss this phenomenon in her writing—she wants to know how Sethe and other once-enslaved people felt in their memories and lived through their trauma, and the way to construct this framework is through the use of “rememory.” Morrison creates a whole new word to describe Sethe’s outlook on memory based on the fact that feelings are unknown to history, and the general public lacking information when it comes to Slavery—we hardly speak the truth of Slavery and ignore the longevity of pain it caused—so to articulate feelings never recorded, it is necessary to create a term for it. In Christians’ words:

...the spectral figures of her work appear to be the literal incarnations of a problematic, namely, the obstructed access to original and traumatic events, and the desire to have a form in which they can, if not be known, then at least be addressed. More than this, the ghostly images that appear in her novels, frequently unbidden and troubling for the characters, permit Morrison to stage a certain compulsiveness in the memory projects to which African American readers are bound. Thematic readings of Morrison’s fiction thus identify her deep concern with haunting as a concern with the force of history and the violent, uncanny nature of its incessant returns. (33)

Christians focuses on ghosts and specters in Morrison’s work as a way of dealing with the past and the continued haunting of events. She also includes the aspect of history’s return when it is not resolved in a constructive way. This brings up an important aspect of rememory for Sethe;

that of the unwillingness to face her past. Sethe articulates how her trauma functions, although she does not reveal any more details of her past to Denver since they are too terrible to relate to her daughter. This is a way of protecting Denver, but also keeping certain parts of her past to herself since she is not ready to share them. Morrison is thus showing us a complex character in Sethe; someone not willing to give up their guilt because she thinks she should wallow in her pain, but also someone who has been through so much trauma and has given up so much of her life to Slavery. Along with the murder of Beloved, she lost her two sons when they ran away because they were scared of what their mother did to their sibling. It seems as though Sethe's life is slowly fading away, and this can all be linked back to the broader conversation of racism and the institution of Slavery. "Rememory" is then what she refers to as her traumatic past on a personal level, while also showing the lasting effects of Slavery as a generational issue.

Motherhood and History: Civil Wars

As Davis posits in her argument about the text of *Beloved* possessing elements of the postmodern movement within its nonlinear timeline and particular focus on race at the forefront of the text, this can be applied to the history that Morrison wishes to highlight in her novel. Davis argues:

Even more striking is her rendering of the Civil War, the apocalypse of American national history, as a minor, inconsequential event in the lives of these former slaves...

Paul D's haunting memory of the chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, outweighs the significance of his participation in the war, of which we learn only in the last few pages of the book. The private realities of persecution and daily survival matter more to Sethe and Paul D than any dates or public documents worthy of note in a history textbook. Paul

D recognizes that prejudice and racism certainly did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation or the surrender of the Confederate Army. (246)

Davis has a clear angle on what aspect of history the novel centers around—a history long forgotten, whereas the Civil War is definitely known to the public on a much larger scale. Paul D's involvement in the Civil War can be overlooked on a first reading because of its insignificance to his story arc, for example; his time in the chain gang replaces the significance in the text because of its oversight of cruelty in historical terms. This particular aspect calls back to Morrison's initial project in making *Beloved* because of its emphasis on history and motherhood. This is why Sethe's life is the main focal point of the novel, along with Beloved's active role as the embodiment of the black community's trauma and a connection between the pained afterlife and the living who are still in pain from all the tremendous losses from the time of Slavery. Morrison ultimately wants to lend a voice to those forgotten to history, especially the story of Margaret Garner who was forgotten based on the "heinous" act she performed. To Morrison, it is worth our time to investigate the lives of those not celebrated or widely known, and this makes the novel effective within its narrative of the struggles of a single black mother trying to reconcile with her past while her trauma drags her back into the mindset of rape and infanticide.

When the murder of the crawling-already? baby takes place in the text, it comes from the perspective of schoolteacher. This is the only instance in the novel when he provides his voice, and Morrison constructs this through free indirect discourse. We can tell it is schoolteacher because of his name calling, objective thinking toward the black people standing around 124, and the reference to his nephews brutalizing Sethe too much which led to her killing one of her children. The narrator proclaims through schoolteacher:

Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education... see what happened when you overbeat creatures God had given you the responsibility of—the trouble it was, and the loss... She was looking at him now, and if his other nephew could see that look he would learn the lesson for sure: you can't mishandle creatures and expect success. (176)

The constant leitmotif present in this passage is one that comes up throughout the novel—the process of dehumanization. Schoolteacher references the beating of a horse as equivalent to the assault on Sethe; he does not view her as a woman, but simply a piece of property, much like the livestock on Sweet Home. His thinking of her as a “creature” is the long history of Slavery and the racist mindset that accompanies this institution, leaving the remnants of this ideology in the present day for whites to think the same as schoolteacher does in this passage. His only objective is to get Sethe back to Sweet Home so she can continue being what O'Reilly calls the “woman as breeder” (128). He will have her reproduce more children so he can eventually persecute and enslave her offspring. This is what Sethe does not want for her children, which makes her situation more understandable in the context of this choiceless choice that she needed to make in order for her children to be free. She does not want them living the life she did on Sweet Home; a life of enslavement as a piece of property and used for reproductive purposes or a field hand depending on the “needs” of the plantation. O'Reilly also argues that Morrison's fictional mothers use “Preservative love” which is at “...the heart of black women's motherwork,” in order to save their children from the system of Slavery and further societal oppression, but it is a controversial way of mothering (120). Sethe's decision to murder her own child has been constantly debated surrounding the novel, and the real life story of Margaret Garner, but there are few choices Sethe has as a mother concerning her children at the moment schoolteacher

wanted them back. She knew that the only way out of this oppressive system was through death, and if anyone was going to break her children down or murder them, Sethe decided it should be herself. In this moment, she claims full agency over the murder of her child, thus providing autonomy that schoolteacher has never seen before, hence his shocked reaction over the “mishandling” of Sethe by his nephews that made her “lose her mind.”

Sethe’s strong inclination to forget the past causes her faulty attempt to live in the present. This shows the style of mothering Sethe incorporates after being raped and beaten by schoolteacher’s two nephews and running away from Sweet Home to get to Ohio where Baby Suggs lives in freedom with Sethe’s three other children. When discussing Halle’s disappearance after the rape, and Paul D explaining the real trauma Halle was inflicted with upon witnessing the dehumanization of his wife, Sethe does not want to continue discussing Halle and thereby adding more grief to flood her brain. Through free indirect discourse once more, Morrison allows us to hear how Sethe handles (or lack thereof) her trauma:

She shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can’t hold another bite? I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up. I am still full of that, God damn it, I can’t go back and add more... I don’t want to know or have to remember that. I have other things to do: worry, for example, about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved, about age and sickness not to speak of love. (83)

She compares her thoughts to that of a child; always searching and wanting more of what it already has, but unwilling to feed it more. This uncanny symbol correlates to the child she killed, and her mind eventually becomes too consumed by this particular thought. This passage explains what was done to her by the nephews as they brutalized her body, and she can only handle so much trauma that comes to her in stages, or piece-by-piece at random times. She states at the end of this quotation how she has to worry about her present day and about her loved ones (notice how she says “Beloved” in this passage, although she is a “new” addition to the household at this time in the novel) and cannot be fixated on more information coming her way about her husband who abandoned her years before. She wants to run from a past that she has never reconciled with, and is blinded by the fact that Beloved is the dead daughter she sacrificed so many years before. The baby ghost haunts the house and Sethe allows it to because she feels as though she deserves it. She also allows her rememory to dictate how she will function in her daily life as images present themselves randomly throughout her days, haunting her of her enslaved past and the murdering of her child. She never wants to come face-to-face with her trauma by talking about it in a constructive way, but instead avoids it as it bubbles to the surface at unknown times. This issue seems to be exclusive to Sethe, but upon further analysis, we can see that Morrison is commenting on the larger framework of memory and trauma in the black community that still lingers: “Morrison may not be burying the past as much as she is allowing the knowledge of it to be passed on and remembered” (Anderson 75). This explains the larger narrative in place about the history associated with the novel, and Morrison’s mission to preserve the past instead of the constant overlook it gets in the master narrative of history.

Mother’s Milk

The taking of Sethe's breast milk is the constant source of her trauma since she could not feed her children or be a "good" mother without this milk, in her mind. When she is discussing her connection to Beloved as her daughter towards the end of the novel, she makes the argument that she will never allow anyone else to take this milk from her or stop her from mothering:

Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby. Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left. (236)

This is a source of inadequacy for Sethe because she has a constant fear that she will not have everything she needs in order to provide for her children. She feels the need to explain how it happened through brute force and not at her own accord to "prove" her worth to the daughter who has been long dead and now haunts her. She goes back to the narrative of Nan and her mother—to explain how Nan was forced to nurse white babies and be their mother because the white mother was too privileged to have her babies drink her milk. Her mother, as discussed before, was unable to mother her, and in this way, Sethe wants to be present for her children and provide for them in the way her mother was not able to do. She cites her own distaste for this crude act from her own childhood when she states "I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left." This is applicable for everything Sethe has gained for herself by using force and demanding certain things because she would not have survived otherwise: "In *Beloved*, the taking of breast milk through the practice of wet nursing signifies the appropriation and commodification of slave women's motherlove. A

slave mother was seldom allowed to nurse her babies and, when she was, they received milk only after the white babies had suckled” (O’Reilly 129). Nan was exploited for her breast milk in a similar fashion to Sethe, thus showing the perpetuation of cruelty during Slavery for black women. White babies took precedence when it came to suckling milk to show the racial hierarchy at a young age, thus causing the divisions in who is allowed to prosper and grow in society and who has to beg and yell for their life. Sethe’s mothering centers around this narrative of not having anything for herself and being left to die; she did not want her children living the same shameful and disgraceful life she did; so sacrifices, in her mind, needed to be made.

As *Beloved* gains power through Sethe’s trauma being released through storytelling, it becomes apparent in the text that Sethe must face her past to move forward despite her insecurities and guilt. Sethe decides to take Denver and *Beloved* to the Clearing to gain the comfort of Baby Suggs’s spirit once more:

Now she sat on Baby Suggs’ rock, Denver and *Beloved* watching her from the trees... Baby Suggs’ long-distance love was equal to any skin-close love she had known. The desire, let alone the gesture, to meet her needs was good enough to lift her spirits to the place where she could take the next step: ask for some clarifying word; some advice about how to keep on with a brain greedy for news nobody could live with in a world happy to provide it... The fingers touching the back of her neck were stronger now—the strokes bolder as though Baby Suggs were gathering strength. Putting the thumbs at the nape, while the fingers pressed the sides. Harder, harder, the fingers moved slowly around toward her windpipe, making little circles on the way. Sethe was actually more surprised than frightened to find that she was being strangled. (111-3)

Sethe gains energy from Baby Suggs, although she is deceased, based on Baby's ability to provide love and closure in the Clearing. She is there to get "some advice about how to keep on with a brain greedy for news nobody could live with in a world happy to provide it," as a way of noting her trauma and the societal need to keep her subjugated to her memory and grief. In this way, her mind is always ready for more haunting and horrifying memories instead of any comfort the likes of the Clearing. It is apparent in this scene that Beloved is doing the choking, even as Sethe wishes for Baby to be present. This shows how Sethe's trauma is stronger than any love Baby ever gave her or any support she found in mother figures like Nan; she lingers over the negatives in her life. Not fully aware or conscious of this strangling, this shows how disconnected Sethe is from herself. She cannot fully heal since she is so detached from her past and the closure she needs going forward, showing how broken she really is from her time in Slavery and after. This all pertains to the long history of mothers mentally damaged by their pasts, which lingers into their parenting. Collins and hooks looked back to Slavery and into the modern day, which is a logical first step, and I believe it is essential to do so here; to identify how Sethe is literally being strangled by her past and trauma that has been accumulated over time that she has kept hidden. Morrison wants to symbolize the causes of Sethe's immense grief to add to the larger narrative in place that involves mothering through trauma. It should be no surprise then to read how Sethe approaches Denver with a warning about rememory and the constant perpetuation of trauma in life, if that is what plagues the person. Therefore, Sethe's way of mothering and the infliction of her actions shows the longevity associated with trauma in the black community and how the history of Slavery is still effecting the descendants of enslaved people in the modern day.

Flooding

Morrison referred to her writing as a kind of remembering through the art of imagination, or fiction. This remembering may not be her own personal memories, but they are the memories that are deeply ingrained in the black experience in the United States. In her essay “The Site of Memory,” this can be seen when she discusses the job of a writer reflecting on the past and recollecting through writing:

...the act of imagination is bound up with memory. You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our ‘flooding.’ (77)

Her use of the word “flooding” here to describe the act of going back to the original state of being makes sense when it comes to writing. There is a sense of urgency to go back to the root of something, and this might be the lived experiences of the ancestor figure that plagues the actions and responses of our beings. For Morrison, the writing of *Beloved* is an intimate one—the examination of the roots of black people in the United States; broadening the conversation about racism and the time of Slavery in this nation; and to also discover the origin of social injustices that still plague society today.

This return in her narrative shows the roots of black motherhood—how it was formed around the survival narrative of enslaved bodies and the forced removal of children from their

mothers; the loss of the familial dynamic in an attempt to eradicate any form of humanity left in those enslaved. This mindset is still applicable in the present, although it has been disputed to have never left the fields of plantations. Morrison debates this master narrative by showing the lives of black mothers pushed to their breaking point in *Beloved* and does this through resistance writing to establish counter narratives. Not only is *Beloved* one of the great American works of the twentieth century, it pushes readers to reconsider the narratives they are accustomed to and the society we have constructed our lives around.

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