The Interiority and Communal Integration of Trauma in Toni Morrison's Beloved

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ABSTRACT

The Interiority and Communal Integration of Trauma in Toni Morrison’s Beloved

A thesis presented to the English and American Literature Department

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My thesis examines the ways in which the characters in Beloved exhibit behaviors and lifestyles that are indicative of the trauma which Toni Morrison purposefully exposes. I make use of Hortense Spillers’ writing about psychoanalysis and race, Saidiya Hartman’s focus on power and posturing in American society, Ernst Van Alphen’s studies of discourse as means for overcoming trauma, and Orlando Patterson’s analysis of the slave’s subjugation caused by the limitations of American discourse. Judith Lewis Herman’s book, Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic to Political Terror, greatly informs my analysis of the characters as victims of personal and cultural psychological trauma and as survivors who are attempting to recover their personal and social histories.
I argue that the character, Beloved, embodies cultural and historical resonances of Sethe's trauma which not only invade the present and possess its survivors, but also take on a life of its own in the way that Beloved's character does through the course of the book. Unlike other approaches, I argue that Paul D helps Sethe to summon, rather than to banish, Beloved by inviting Sethe into discourse about the past. Rather than describing the women gathering in front of 124 as an exorcism, I argue that their assembly integrates a previously incoherent trauma into the larger community. Their presence helps Sethe to break out of the isolation and stigma or her trauma, as well as the social negation imposed by slavery and perpetuated by her community's denial. In addition to providing tools for tracing the affects of intellectual and social domination which occurred in slavery, the various symptoms of trauma and stages of recovery provide a valuable reference for understanding the initial limitations and ultimate profundity of Sethe's individual character and cultural history.
Introduction:

In Toni Morrison’s “The Site of Memory,” she makes explicit her attempt to tell the truth about the history of African Americans. She claims that the most atrocious incidents and traumatic aspects of slavery are either omitted from her literary heritage or are sugar-coated so that outsiders would not be too repulsed to help. Of the popular black writers who precede her, such as Frederick Douglass and Phyllis Wheatley, Morrison says that “in shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things” (Site 110). Her task as a writer is to recreate the interior life behind the veil of publicly-palatable narrative. Morrison’s novel, Beloved, reflects her desire to imagine interiority without painted veil. My thesis examines the ways in which the characters in Beloved exhibit behaviors and lifestyles that are indicative of the trauma which Morrison purposefully exposes. I argue that the character, Beloved, embodies cultural and historical resonances of Sethe’s trauma which not only invade the present and possess its survivors, but also take on a life of its own in the way that Beloved’s character does through the course of the book. Unlike other approaches, I argue that Paul D helps Sethe to summon, rather than to banish, Beloved by inviting Sethe into discourse about the past. If we consider that Beloved is called into being by Paul D’s willingness to bear witness to the entirety of Sethe’s trauma, this yields a new understanding of the scene where women assemble in front of Sethe’s house: rather than describing it as an exorcism, I argue that the
gathering is an integration of a previously incoherent trauma into the larger community.

In addition to considering Morrison's own motive for foregrounding the inner lives of her characters, I am also mindful of Hortense Spillers' writing about psychoanalysis and race, Saidiya Hartman’s focus on postures of power in American society, Ernst Van Alphen's studies of discourse as means for overcoming trauma, and Orlando Patterson's analysis of the slave's subjugation caused by the limitations of American discourse. Judith Lewis Herman’s book, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic to Political Terror*, greatly informs my analysis of the characters as victims of personal and cultural psychological trauma and as survivors who are attempting to recover their personal and social histories.

Before proceeding, I would like to make a disclaimer similar to one which Jennifer Fitzgerald makes for her reading of *Beloved* in terms of the objects relations theory: that we are examining a text and not people or patients.¹ Like Fitzgerald, I too believe that psychoanalysis is only one approach to understanding the characters in this novel, but that the abundant similarities between the characters’ behaviors and the various elements of trauma symptoms are particularly valuable for understanding the contours of former slaves’ interior lives. By recognizing that Sethe’s experience provides a literary depiction of trauma, I am acknowledging that the trauma which she

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¹ "Literary criticism examines texts, not people; it analyzes discourse, not psyches. Psychoanalysis is only one of the discourses circulating through the novel... it is therefore not offered as a truth to which the characters, *qua* patients, must be led. It is nevertheless worth noting the resemblances between the discourses of psychoanalysis and slavery" (Fitzgerald 670).
experiences is not only limited to her specific "case," but that the symptoms are representative of the ways in which trauma can be manifested in African American individuals and communities. My consistent reference to Judith Lewis Herman's work is, therefore, meant to do more than simply "diagnose" Sethe; it is an attempt to recognize the various ways in which trauma is present and alive among the characters who represent aspects of African American history and community.

This kind of comparison, between literary representations of trauma and African American cultural history is something which Hortense Spillers calls for in her essay "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife was Your Mother." She says that psychological discussion about object, subject, and subjectivity is a painfully glaring absence in African American interpretive work (All the Things 377). Spillers elaborates on this idea with her observation that the major topics of psychoanalysis, such as self-division, displacement, and transfer of power among generations, are central components of the African American community (All the Things 385). In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," she furthers her plea for foregrounding black sentence and humanity despite the institution of slavery which pointedly tried to separate the captive body from its social identity or individual personhood. Keeping in mind Spillers' comments about the absence of psychoanalysis in African American interpretive projects, her insights about the ways in which slavery assumed African Americans to be inhuman, and Morrison's commitment to unearthing
the rich interior life of her characters, I argue that figuring Beloved as a representation of trauma serves the important purpose of understanding how interior life demands telling and integration.

I also examine Ernst van Alphen’s book about the importance of discourse in framing and processing experience. In his chapter “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma,” van Alphen explains that experience is formed by the discourse and symbols which represent it (van Alphen 24). He says that if experience is not put into words, it is a “failed experience” because the individual cannot express or frame it intellectually, and because the lack of this narrative frame prohibits the individual from having their experience shared, validated, and accounted for by a community.

Orlando Patterson’s book, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study, further explores the importance of discourse, as well as the limitations of vocabulary for African Americans. He explicates the ways in which intellectual and social symbols were used to establish the power and authority of the white masters as the norm in slave societies by tracing the use of both intellectual symbols that are conveyed through representations of thoughts and beliefs, as well as social symbols which are enacted as rituals or ceremonies. He terms the phenomenon of being unable to represent oneself in society “social death.” It is because of the ability Patterson highlights of symbolic ideas and actions to establish white authority over their slaves that Hortense Spillers says African-American liberation is dependent both on breaking apart of “American behavior that make such syntax possible,” and
on creating of new modes of representation which can more appropriately express the African-American experience (Mama's Baby 226).

Saidiya Hartman further complicates the issue of subjectivity and agency which Patterson raises by tracing systems of control beyond the semantic system in her book Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America. She exposes the common “practice” of the dominating class which allows for “transient zones of freedom” in which certain acts of resistance were tolerated (Hartman 50). In this sense, resistance occurs not in spite of domination but because the “magnitude of domination” allows for small “freedoms” in order to create “contented subjection.” In other words, slavery attempts to encompass any agency or subjectivity among slaves by tolerating some exhibition of resistance. Hartman points out that the problem of subjectivity is even more difficult than finding the appropriate language or symbol to represent the individual African American experience because slave masters undermine any feeling of autonomy by attempting to claim sovereignty over rebel acts. Although this does not mean that slaves did not have identities or that they were not able to exert agency on their own behalf outside of their masters’ purview, it does mean that masters attempted to gain social recognition as the empowered at the expense of publicly discrediting the slave with any mind or life of their own. The lack of public recognition for slave’s humanity and ability beyond their master makes a narration even more difficult for the African American who is not presumed to have any power or subjectivity of their own.
My paper examines the ways in which Sethe's trauma is not only a result of the inability to articulate experience too extreme to imagine or incorporate into consciousness, but that her trauma is also caused by the American institution of slavery which uses language, symbols, and public posturing in order to objectify and subjugate the African American. By keeping in mind that Sethe's trauma is representative of something more than her experience alone, I intend to highlight the more textured sense of inner life which Toni Morrison makes visible in African American narrative.

Identifying Symptoms of Trauma

One of the first significant example of how recognizing traumatic symptoms in the novel furthers Morrison's project of focusing on the interior lives of characters can be found by examining Sethe in the opening of the novel. Sethe is outcast from her community, and she is plagued by sensory flashbacks of her dead baby crawling up the stairs. Denver tells Paul D that "Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by" (Beloved 14). It might be tempting to say that the images and "rememories" which haunt Sethe are supernatural, or to dismiss her reclusive lifestyle as stubbornness on Sethe's part. If, however, we compare Sethe's state with Judith Lewis Herman's description of trauma survivors who attempt to avoid reliving their experience, we see how closely it corresponds with the state in which we meet Sethe at the beginning of the novel. Herman says:

Because reliving a traumatic experience provokes such intense emotional distress, traumatized people go to great lengths to avoid it. The effort to
ward off intrusive symptoms, though self-protective in intent, further aggravates the post-traumatic syndrome, for the attempt to avoid reliving the trauma too often results in a narrowing of consciousness, a withdrawal from engagement with others, and an impoverished life. (Herman 42)

The state of “Constriction” which Herman elucidates here aptly portrays Sethe’s lifestyle: “withdrawn” and “impoverished,” she does not engage with her community or have the capacity to answer Denver’s pleas of loneliness. Herman says that this restriction is an effort for victims to protect themselves from a world that has been rendered unsafe by their trauma (Herman 46). Sethe articulates a conscious restriction of her life with her adamant “No moving. No leaving,” in answer to Paul D’s question about Denver bearing the life of an exile (Beloved 15). This statement illustrates the kind of limited consciousness and restrictive lifestyle described by Herman, which leaves Sethe unable to comprehend Denver’s unhappiness, and reaffirms the nature of her self-imposed seclusion.

Sethe’s detachment goes beyond physical removal from her peers; Denver explains that her mom is “the one who never looked away,” and remains “quiet, queenly” in the face of grotesque violence, such as a man being trampled by a horse, and a sow eating its own litter (Beloved 12). Paul D also notices an emotional void in Sethe when he remembers: “her eyes did not pick up a flicker of light. They were two wells into which he had trouble gazing. Even punched out they needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held.” (Beloved 9). If we apply Herman’s further elaboration on the experience of Constriction, Sethe’s eerie
calm and "emptiness" begin to make sense. Herman cites studies of combat veterans with PTSD that demonstrate long term changes in "endogenous opioids," which cause "a dissociative state in which the perception of pain and the normal emotional responses to pain are severed" (Herman 44). So "Constriction" not only consists of an attempt to avoid painful memories which severely limits the daily experience of survivors, but is also comprised by a numbness or inability to feel.

Sethe not only demonstrates the impact of her trauma with her impermeably calm demeanor and seemingly hollow gaze; she also experiences numbness through her inability to see color or to feel her back. The narrator explains how she became inured to color after painful associations with red and pink: "Every dawn she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked its color. There was something wrong with that. It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it" (Beloved 39). Sethe also dissociates herself from her back, where she had once been victim to profound pain from lashing, by calling her scars "a chokecherry tree" (Beloved 18). Sethe accepts Amy Denver's name for the scars on her back both because the image of a tree explains the inhuman markings remaining from slavery in appropriately separate terms from her natural body, and because she can no longer feel the scars on her back as part of her being, and can therefore only claim it as something other from which she has dissociated herself. If we did not understand that these topical areas of analgesia for Sethe are literary
representations of Constriction, we might otherwise misread her character as unfeeling and vacuous. Knowing that her numbness is symptomatic of her trauma allows us to comprehend how Sethe can be a loving mother and woman with depth, despite having certain (necessary) callousness.

"Constriction" is one of three main categories which Herman says describe the various symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The other two categories of PTSD symptoms are "Intrusion" and "Hyperarousal" (Herman 35). The first few pages of the novel, in which Sethe has run through the tall chamomile weeds and is suddenly reminded of Sweet Home, establishes that the second category, "Intrusion," corresponds with episodes in her daily life:

The plash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feat, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out in shameless beauty. (Beloved 6)

Despite the fact that every bit of Sweet Home makes Sethe want to cry out, its memory appears before her during even the most mundane moments. Sethe confesses to Denver that the memory of Sweet Home "comes back whether we want it to or not" (Beloved 14).

Reading Herman's explication of the symptoms which fall into the category of Intrusion provides an apt explanation for this: "...trauma repeatedly interrupts...small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event" (Herman 37). Herman further explains
that survivors often waver between Constriction and Intrusion, "...caught between the extremes of amnesia or of reliving the trauma, between floods of intense, overwhelming feeling, and arid states of no feeling at all..." (Herman 47). The intensely present and intrusive feelings are blatantly juxtaposed with lack of emotion in narrative: "124 was so full of strong feeling perhaps she was oblivious to the loss of anything at all" (Beloved 39). Just as trauma survivors are caught between overwhelming feeling and inability to feel, Sethe suffers so much that she cannot feel anymore.

Recognizing that Sethe is already enduring the intrusion of traumatic memories and a life limited by her trauma helps us to understand Paul D's and Beloved's roles differently: neither of them bring about a "return of the repressed" since, as Heffernan points out, the past "...never really goes away because the present does not rule it..." (Heffernan 562). Beloved's appearance, therefore, could not be considered a return of forgotten memories or the resurrection of the dead; and, Paul D could not be described as bringing back the ghost of something which had never gone. Critics have effectively argued that Paul D exacerbates Sethe's symptoms by attempting to banish the "ghost." Although Paul D does fight against the intrusion of the traumatic symptoms, I will prove that his willingness to listen to Sethe's story is more of an occasion for the haunting trauma to take on form and coherence than it is a threat to a supposed vengeful ghost.

From the moment Paul D enters Sethe's house, he begins bearing witness to her pain, tracing her scars, cradling her sorrowful breasts, and
most importantly, asking her to tell her story. Van Alphen observes the following about the past coming to life in discourse:

... the use of discourse depends on human agency: it is ultimately human agency that activates the past embodied in existing discourses, but at the same time brings about, by its use of discourse, the experience of the present and its memory... Memory is, then, the mutually constitutive interaction between the past and the present, shared as culture but acted out by each of us as an individual. (van Alphen 37)

By inviting her into discourse, Paul D gives Sethe a reason to let her traumatic past come into being in coherent form. The chance to try finding word-shapes and narrative for her story, allows Sethe to have her experience, which was previously impossible to articulate, shared and validated. Since Sethe's sharing and comparing fragments of memory with Paul D makes her story more accessible and conceptually viable, Beloved's incarnation can be understood as the formation of Sethe's story coming to life through the opportunity for discourse.

One of the main reasons that Sethe has previously had difficulty making use of narrative or words for framing her experience is that the semiotics available to her were created for the purpose of objectifying African-Americans. I am mindful, in particular here, of Patterson's exploration of symbolic uses for establishing authority (Patterson 49-52). An example of the way in which the use of semiotics renders the master powerful and the slave powerless is Sethe's classification by Schoolteacher. His "scientific" measurements and categorization of the slaves' supposedly "animal like" qualities is an example of using intellectual symbols to create authority by suggesting that the slave is "other." Spillers' description of the
captive body explicates what Schoolteacher is attempting to prove by probing and measuring Sethe:

'atomizing' of the captive body provides another angle on the divided flesh: we lose any hint or suggestion of... relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features... the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory. (Mama's Baby 208)

In addition to being objectified as Spillers describes, through the intellectually symbolic behaviors which Patterson outlines, Sethe is also victim to social symbols of her powerlessness. Schoolteacher's instructive "nursing" of Sethe as though she were an animal illustrates the kind of ritualistic social symbol Patterson identifies, which cements power of the master over his slave. It is clear how, in addition to the extremity of their experience, the symbolic "order" impedes Sethe and her peers from constructing a narrative or communicating their own subjectivity and personhood with the semantics provided in America.

The previously indescribable experience that burdens Sethe and Paul D is not only due to a deficiency of symbolic language available to them at the time, but also because the available semiotics figure African-Americans as objects, inferior, weak, and subhuman. There is, therefore, no African-American subjective view possible to articulate within the American vocabulary or language system. This problem is something which Toni Morrison herself has written about, in "Romancing the Shadow." She says that the European settlers in America were rejected by their own countries,
and therefore projected their insecurities and feelings of inferiority and powerlessness onto the population of "others:"

in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me... what rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism – a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American... (Romancing 38)

The inability to use language to express the African-American point of view protracts traumatic elements of isolation caused by the inability to either conceptualize an experience privately or articulate it publicly.

Schoolteacher challenges Sethe’s sense of her humanity and belonging by indexing characteristics of his slaves in order to classify them as non-human. This not only establishes slaves as other, which as Patterson points out is the beginning of “social death,” it also positions Schoolteacher as the authority figure. Patterson explains that “the slave was usually powerless in relation to another individual,” as part of the coercion of slavery (Patterson 4).

The coercion or total sovereignty of the master, in the way that Hartman describes, is present at Sweet Home even before Schoolteacher has power. Under the “good” master, Mr. Garner, Halle is allowed to buy Baby Suggs’ freedom. Halle garnering freedom for his mother is an example of the so-called “magnanimity” of the master’s domination. Although the master allows Baby Suggs to go free in exchange for her son’s labor, he does not hesitate to remind her that he “let” Halle “buy” her (Beloved 146). This serves as a perpetual reminder that she is only free because the master granted it to her, and also instills a perpetual fear in Halle that if the exchange of his
mother's freedom for his lifelong labor would ever be violated on his part, his mother's freedom could be taken away.

The notion of a slave master's insidious threat of power arose in a conversation with Toni Morrison in March 2009 in which she said that Sethe would have been fine if Schoolteacher had not come for her. I wondered for weeks what that meant, until I read Herman's explanation of how a traumatic event assaults its victim's mental and physical states of being:

Traumatic events violate the autonomy of the [victim]...at the moment of trauma, almost by definition, the individual's point of view counts for nothing. In rape, for example, the purpose of the attack is precisely to demonstrate contempt for the victim's autonomy and dignity. The traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others. (Herman 52-3)

The real trauma, then, is Schoolteacher's coming to bring her back to slavery because it is a pointed attack on her autonomous escape from slavery. Sethe is forced to escape by herself because her husband, unbeknownst to her, is incapacitated from the trauma of seeing her assaulted and "milked." Her flight is, therefore, even more poignantly her own achievement because the power dynamics of slavery absented her husband as protector of the family.

If Sethe had successfully escaped with all of her children, despite her husband's disappearance, her story would have been sad but victorious and full of pride for being the subject of her own story. The moment that Schoolteacher comes for her, though, is profoundly traumatic because it takes away her subjectivity, negates the freedom she thought she found for herself and her family, and threatens her dignity. Hartman's writing also helps us

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3 Private conversation with Toni Morrison at Harvard University on March 3, 2009
understand that Schoolteacher coming to bring Sethe back is reminiscent of the controlled freedom that was considered within the domain of slavery. It is as though her escape is a routine resistance to slavery which yields short-term freedom but is negated by the master’s ultimate claim.

Although Schoolteacher’s decision to leave without Sethe in his custody shows some recognition that she has behaved in a way that is beyond his control, Sethe’s attempt to save her children does not succeed. Readers can be gratified that Schoolteacher relinquishes his claim on Sethe, because his retreat shows that his power is not as absolute as he would like himself and others to believe; his power is, in a sense, undermined by Sethe’s unexpected murder of her daughter. Unfortunately, Sethe’s desperate show of resistance is tragic because the master’s power can only be matched with equally horrendous violence. Her public claim of motherhood and autonomy costs Sethe her daughter’s life.

The trauma of having Sethe’s subjectivity destabilized by Schoolteacher’s return, and simultaneously reinforced by her violent stand against him is further compounded by the fact that she kills her daughter. In Herman’s chapter on “Captivity,” she explains that:

“...the final step in the psychological control of the victim is not completed until she has been forced to violate her own moral principles and to betray her basic human attachments. Psychologically, this is the most destructive of all coercive techniques, for the victim who has succumbed loathes herself. It is at this point, when the victim under duress participates in the sacrifice of others, that she is truly ‘broken.’” (Herman 83)
Herman’s language about prisoners of war and victims of abuse is readily applicable to Sethe’s situation as a runaway slave. She “sacrifices” her daughter “under duress,” and in so doing surrenders to Schoolteacher’s categorization of her as not human. Although Sethe insists “I stopped him... I took and put my babies where they’d be safe,” they were not safe and the sacrifice she made “broke” her (Beloved 164). Despite being the victorious and loving Mom that Sethe has striven to be, she also becomes a victim to the threat of captivity, and a murderer. On one hand, Sethe is forced into an ambiguous position as both a victim (object) to Schoolteacher and a loving mother (subject) for her children. On the other hand, Sethe experiences the complete negation of her subjectivity because no matter what she had done to escape or does to “protect” her children, Schoolteacher’s power trumps hers, and any attempt to contend with his threat of violence is self-destructive.

The ambiguity of Sethe’s role in the traumatic event results in the kind of “failed experience” van Alphen describes. There is no language to accommodate a story of Sethe the victorious rescuer and protector which can also encompass the complexity of her experience as simultaneous victim, object, subject, mother, and murderer. This incongruity results in Paul D’s comment that “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” (Beloved 164). He is right that the problem is in what she claims, in

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4 Ernst van Alphen’s discussion of the challenges of articulating trauma experiences includes: “1. Ambiguous actanial positions: one is neither subject nor object of the events, or one is both at the same time; 2. total negation of any actanial position or subjectivity” (van Alphen 28).
her telling of the story as subject who takes action by committing murder at the very moment when her agency is simultaneously obliterated.

Sethe’s desire to claim ownership of her escape from Sweet Home leads to a disjointed narrative about how she “protects” her babies from Schoolteacher. Because Sethe has demonstrated a “narrowing of consciousness” symptomatic of PTSD, it makes sense that she would also have trouble realizing the depth to which her agency had been compromised. Laurie Vickroy explains the necessary confusion about the victim/survivor’s role in trauma in her article “The Politics of Abuse: The Traumitized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras.” She says that to recognize the entirety of the victim’s own powerlessness would completely defeat the victim’s selfhood (Vickroy 93). Vickroy’s insights about the depths to which subjugation of slavery renders the slave too powerless to admit without self annihilation is easily applicable to Sethe’s experience of her master’s claim.

In addition to the psychic damage that Schoolteacher’s return and the subsequent murder cause Sethe, she also suffers from the second stage of “social death,” which Patterson calls “extrusion.” This stage occurs when the slave is made to feel that they are an insider who has fallen and is, therefore, deprived of his or her community (Patterson 44). Rather than sympathizing with her, the former slaves in Sethe’s community are confused by her attempt to claim subjectivity and kinship in a system in which Spillers explains: “motherhood as female bloodrite is outraged, is denied” (Mama’s Baby 228). Sethe cannot compete with the institutionalized denial of a mother’s claim on
her children, so her attempt to save what was hers remains unrecognized by the community. Vickroy explains that "the traumatic experience of social powerlessness and devalued racial identity prevents the African American community from joining together and truthfully evaluating the similarity of their circumstances, much less finding ways to oppose dominant forces" (Vickroy 92). As a result of her peers' inability to identify with or show compassion for Sethe, she is criminalized and excluded from her community for eighteen years (Beloved 173). Sethe's predicament is difficult because, despite her attempt to have agency and subjectivity beyond the oppressive institution of slavery, her escape from slavery and her desperation in the face of her Master's claim are unrecognized and therefore denied.

Beloved as Trauma Personified and its Communal Integration

Now that I have explored some of the ways in which making connections between trauma studies and Sethe's history allow us to understand her unveiled story in a more sympathetic and comprehensive way, I will develop the idea that Beloved can be read as the personification of Sethe's trauma. Much of the psychoanalytic criticism written about Beloved describes her as a ghost of the murdered daughter or as a mere representation of Sethe's grief (Fitzgerald, Pass). Other critics describe Beloved as a victim of sexual abuse, in an attempt to address the fact that Beloved assumes her own history and memories in a way more significant than a spectral representation could (Bouson, House). Since critics who interpret Beloved as a ghost cannot
sufficiently explain her historical resonance, and articles that attempt to expand on Beloved’s history cannot account for her relation to the present, the most comprehensive understanding of Beloved’s character must be somewhere in the middle of specter and substance.

My interpretation of Beloved as representative of Sethe’s trauma attempts to incorporate both aspects of her spectral and substantial character. Although I do not claim that this is the only way to understand Beloved, I do make the case that a comparison of the similarities between Sethe’s relationship with Beloved and a survivor’s interaction with his/her trauma leads to a deeper understanding of the history of suffering which Morrison attempts to expose in the novel. Because Beloved straddles both categories of real and unreal, it is difficult to pinpoint who she is and what she represents. My claim that Beloved represents Sethe’s trauma is not meant to diminish the autonomous aspects of her character, such as her power to “move”\textsuperscript{5} characters like Paul D, her dangerous hold on Sethe, and her intimidating affect on Denver. Her dynamics with the other characters prove that trauma is more than a representation; it is its own character both because of the demands it makes on its survivors and because of the history on the boat which is uniquely Beloved’s.

One way of acknowledging her profound ambiguity while still being able to make use of her figuration is to compare Beloved to the way that trauma functions as representative of emotional history and memory, while commanding a tangible force of its own. Judith Lewis Herman explains that

\textsuperscript{5} Beloved begins to “move” Paul D around the house in \textit{Beloved} p 114
“traumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their
source and to take on a life of their own” (Herman 34). In Cathy Caruth’s
book, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, she also
mentions the demands which trauma is capable of imposing on survivors:

…it cannot be understood in terms of any wish or unconscious meaning,
but is, purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the
will of the one it inhabits. Unlike the symptoms of a normal neurosis,
whose painful memories can be understood ultimately in terms of the
attempted avoidance of unpleasurable conflict, the painful repetition of
the flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind
to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning
in any way. (Caruth 59)

What is particularly compelling about Caruth’s statement is that survivors do
not have control over the flashbacks to their personal trauma; it is an
unavoidable re-living of some fragment of the traumatic past, which occurs
“against the will” of the surviving victim. Herman further articulates the
uniqueness of a flashback or nightmare by explaining that traumatic
memories are re-experienced as sensations or images with confusing
immediacy that makes the memories seem as though they are in the present,
because the feelings and visions occur out of context (Herman 38-9). Since the
memories which return, like the original trauma itself, have no way of being
comprehended by the psyche, they come in pieces, bodily sensations, and
unformed thoughts which remain incoherent and yet more powerful because
of their unchanged clarity. The vivid images and fragments of memory which
recur have “a life of their own” because they invade the survivor’s present,
and they overpower the survivor’s will. In this sense, trauma functions as
both a representation of an inassimilable history and a force unto itself.
Ernst van Alphen can assist in reconciling the idea that Beloved represents Sethe’s trauma, while containing a separate and distant history, by explaining the crucial relationship between an individual trauma and a historical precedent for helping to contextualize the otherwise unexplainable trauma. He says that events do not stand alone, and are not isolated within an individual experience or within a community: “We experience events from the perspective of narrative frameworks in terms of which these events can be understood as meaningful… it is exactly this impossibility of activating a narrative framework… that characterizes Holocaust experiences” (van Alphen 33). While Beloved’s history of abandonment and abuse on the slave ship in Middle Passage is hers, its purpose is to historicize Sethe’s trauma as belonging to a larger narrative framework. Beloved’s history gives a context for understanding the otherwise incomprehensible horror of Sethe’s past.

Joseph Flanagan also explores the importance of precedence in understanding the meaning of a traumatic event, when he suggests that traumatic events occur in two instances: one which is “impossible for the subject to assimilate” and another which “belatedly confers recognition of traumatic import upon the first” (Flanagan 399). He says that having a “feedback loop” is a vital component for assimilating meaning. In this sense, Beloved’s history offers the context of displaced people who were enslaved and objectified so that Sethe’s experience of violated motherhood, ruptured families, and confused subjectivity can be better understood. Knowing that Sethe’s trauma of being labeled “other,” being treated as inhuman, and
having her freedom violently threatened occurred as part of a system of oppression and subjugation makes her experience less irrelevant or alienated because it exists in relation suffering of other slave women before her.

Although Deborah Horvitz’s article “Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in Beloved” is focused on the ways in which Beloved embodies both Sethe’s mother and dead daughter, her rationale is relevant for understanding the function of Beloved’s historical resonance. Horvitz says that Beloved “…creates a matrilineal connection between Africa and America” (Horvitz 157). She further describes Beloved as “inter-generational, [and] inter-continental,” and says that the “stories about her matrilineal ancestry are life-giving” (Horvitz 158). Horvitz’s insights about Beloved’s cross-generational and intercontinental origins affirm my idea that Beloved provides a historical framework for Sethe to understand her own experience of trauma.

The thought that Beloved’s stories are life-giving is particularly germane to my interpretation of what it means for Sethe to form her own narrative. Narrating trauma in a way that incorporates a rich understanding of its occurrence and its implications is imperative for healing. Much of the isolation and feelings of shame that accompany a traumatic history can begin to be dispelled by knowing that the trauma occurred in a historical context, rather than as a phenomenon which defies reason or precedent. The ability to locate individual trauma as part of a larger history is, therefore, an important part of making the otherwise fragmented memory more comprehensive story.
In Sethe’s case, the recognition that her trauma is an explainable reaction to an oppressive culture, and that other women have also suffered from the alienation and objectification that she has, makes her story more accessible for assimilating into narrative. The context which Beloved provides Sethe, then, is helpful for her in forming an understanding of the traumatic event without feeling further despair at being alone in her experience.

In addition to giving Sethe a sense of the history to which her trauma belongs, Beloved’s presence coincides with an exaggeration of traumatic symptoms, and creates the demand for telling. The first example of how Beloved causes Sethe’s traumatic symptoms to become more severe is the moment when Sethe first sees her: Sethe’s bladder fills and she floods the ground in a way similar to her water breaking when giving birth. This is reminiscent of the flashbacks Sethe had been experiencing before Beloved, but it is more visceral. Beloved also brings about more sensory experiences of Sethe’s past with her “new milk” breath (Beloved 96). In addition to exacerbating the sensory nature of Sethe’s flashbacks, Beloved also demands narration. Denver tells us that in contrast to her hatred for Sethe’s stories that are not about her, Beloved forces Sethe to narrate memories from a “gleaming, powerful world;” “Beloved took every opportunity to ask some funny question and get Sethe going. Denver noticed how greedy she was to hear Sethe talk” (Beloved 63). Beloved’s coming, therefore, represents a climax in PTSD symptoms and “rememory” for Sethe, as well as the embodiment of compunction to narrate her past.
Sethe’s interaction with Beloved further intensifies her confusion about herself as object versus subject, and about her own self worth in a way similar to what happens when people are exposed to trauma. Judith Lewis Herman explains that “trauma forces the survivor to relive all her earlier struggles over autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy” (Herman 52). We see a similar kind of struggle illustrated in Sethe’s negotiations with Beloved: “when once or twice Sethe tried to assert herself – be the unquestioned mother whose word was law and who knew what was best – Beloved slammed things” until finally “Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child...” (Beloved 242, 250). Sethe is confused about whether she is mother or child; her identity and authority are in jeopardy. The mantra “I am Beloved and she is mine” which is repeated throughout the two monologue sections beginning on pages 210 and 214 also illustrates the extent to which the trauma has overtaken Sethe; she cannot tell the difference between herself and Beloved, which could be interpreted as being part of the struggle for autonomy and identity. The phrase “she is my face” is more than simply laying claim to another person, as some critics have suggested. It is, instead a desperate attempt to locate the self in a world that has lost meaning because of a trauma which negates the self. If the dissociated trauma is “her” face, but her face is also “mine,” it means that Sethe is trying to “join” her severed parts back into her consciousness.

Sethe not only struggles with identity and authority, she also feels compelled to answer for “leaving” her daughter when she sent her ahead

\(^6\) “now we can join” Beloved 213
during their escape. Judith Lewis Herman describes the importance of having to explain the circumstances surrounding trauma as an attempt to find meaning in her chapter on "Remembrance and Mourning." She says that "reconstructing the trauma story" involves accounting for the significance of the trauma to the individual and to the important people in the survivor’s life (Herman 178). As part of trying to explain or understand how the trauma fits into the survivor’s life, they are faced with the questions of “why? And why me?” Sethe engages in this kind of rhetorical questioning with Beloved, who demands to know why and how things happened as they did. Sethe’s attempt to explain herself, and her intentions, to an indifferent Beloved can be read as an exercise in reconstructing her trauma.

Sethe’s efforts to tell her story, and the subsequent changes in the quality of Sethe’s memories as well as in the intensity of her engagement with Beloved as the traumatic past are not without consequence for Denver and Paul D. Some critics have noted that Beloved functions as a “doppelganger” for other characters’ own losses or as a “catalyst” for others’ “rememories” and healing (Koolish 171, Barnett 420). I agree with the idea that Beloved’s presence stirs up memories and calls identities into question for both of the characters who are important to Sethe: Paul D, and Denver.

The thought of Beloved makes Paul D shudder because she reminds him of something he feels he should remember, and because she forces the rusted tin open (Beloved 235, 117). Linda Koolish, in her piece “‘To be Loved and Cry Shame’: A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” says
that the sex between Paul D and Beloved is really "the disorienting experience of making love with... the wild, tormented, profoundly feeling aspect of Sethe that is Beloved" and that this part of her "provide[s] Paul D with access to his own past" (Koolish 189). Although I disagree that Beloved is merely an avatar for Sethe, I do agree that the trauma that she represents is Sethe's and that exposure to this trauma touches Paul D in an unexpected way that feels like an assault.

Paul D had compartmentalized his pain by placing his red heart into a tin and learning to love just a little so that when the things he cares for are taken, there is still something left over (Beloved 45). His way of life is just as symptomatic of post traumatic stress as Sethe's: his rusted tin epitomizes Constriction. Even before Paul D was raped in Albert, Georgia, which forced him to "shut down part of his head," his masters at Sweet Home made him feel as though a rooster was more vibrant and manly than he. Orlando Patterson explains how it is possible for a slave to lose a sense of self in his discussion of the coercive aspects of slavery: "the slave became an extension of his master's power" (Patterson 4). We see this coercion haunting Paul D, who is passed off as one of Garner's Sweet Home Men. Garner likes to call his slaves "Men." This term not only sets an extreme standard that limits their behavior so that they are "minus women, fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets..." but also introduces the slaves into society as extensions of Mr. Garner who bought and raised them to be Men and not boys (Beloved 10-11). The result of the "good" master, Mr. Garner's, coercing

7 Beloved 45 and 73
his slaves to be subject only in relation to him is so profound that Paul D is left questioning his own masculinity:

It was always clear to Paul D that those two were men whether Garner said so or not. It troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point. OH, he did manly things, but was that Garner’s gift or his own will? What would he have been – anyway – before Sweet Home – without Garner? (Beloved 220).

In addition to suffering from a crisis of manhood, Paul D suffers deep trauma on the chain gang in Albert. Like Sethe who experiences some analgesia, he feels that the only way to manage his compromised masculinity at the hands (or claws) of the “more manly” rooster, as well as the taste of iron from the chain gang is to put them into “the tobacco tin lodged in his chest” (Beloved 113). The tin is buried inside him as deep as the inside part which he had previously urged Sethe to delve into with his help.

Koolish says that because Beloved “is in fact a part of Sethe,” it makes sense that the anguished past that she embodies “intrudes on Sethe and Paul D’s lovemaking” (Koolish 180). As Koolish suggests, Paul D’s (physical) contact with Beloved forces him to reach the inside part. His exposure to the trauma that Beloved represents touches him so that the heart which he had closed off from consciousness comes to the forefront and he shouts “Red heart. Red heart. Red heart” (Beloved 117). Although Beloved’s assault on Paul D occurs very much against his will, I am willing to entertain Pamela Barnett’s suggestion, in her article “Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in Beloved,” that “As much as it hurts to feel his heart again, he needs it if he is to love” (Barnett 423). Paul D has to confront his own inside parts when he
comes into contact with the representation of Sethe’s trauma, and because, as Amy Denver tells Sethe, “can’t nothing heal without pain...” the encounter is not easy (Beloved 78).

In contrast to the disturbing nature of Paul D’s intimacy with Beloved, Denver benefits from getting to know Beloved in a more obvious way. Because Denver spent her childhood being victim to Sethe’s traumatized lifestyle, she has had to suffer from isolation and stigma in the way that a victim of trauma does. She even experiences the kind of topical analgesia that Sethe does when, after being asked about her mother as a murderer, Denver is so profoundly scared that she loses the ability to hear for two years (Beloved 103). Beloved helps Denver to realize that, although she has suffered from growing up in an environment plagued by flashbacks and numbness, the trauma that paralyzes Sethe is not her own. Watching Beloved transform her mother from an independent and dominating personality to a “ragdoll” (Beloved 243) helps Denver to see her mother as a victim for the first time. Instead of being scared of her mother, she recognizes Sethe’s vulnerability and becomes protective of her. The realization that she has the capacity to be stronger than her mother allows Denver to act for the first time outside the stigma she had accepted as a child, to become an independent agent instead of a dependent victim. Sethe’s complete immersion in her trauma helps Denver to differentiate between her mom’s trauma and her own suffering. In the midst of Sethe’s monologues that claim Beloved as hers, Denver is able to express her perspective more clearly: “Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her
blood right along with my mother’s milk” (*Beloved* 205). These two simple lines are powerful because of Denver’s ability to decipher difference between Beloved’s blood and the milk that was hers; the difference between her mother’s trauma and her relationship or proximity to it. When Paul D, at the close of the novel, says “you grown” it is because Denver is finally capable of forming her own opinions, and has learned to live outside of the trauma that had threatened to define her (*Beloved* 267).

Just as Sethe would have been all right if Schoolteacher had not come, Beloved would not have taken form if Paul D had not arrived. Where Denver had been disinterested in hearing Sethe’s story, and had in fact grown deaf from the terror of hearing the truth about her sister’s murder, Paul D can bear witness. He asks Sethe how she is on the inside, and urges her to examine the depths of her pain: “Jump, if you want to, ’cause I’ll catch you, girl. I’ll catch you ‘fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I’ll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out” (*Beloved* 46). His offer to be there for her affords Sethe the opportunity to share her story. It is significant that, just as the novel is conceived of after the reconstruction era, Paul D and Sethe only share their memories once slavery has been abolished and they are free. This opportunity would most likely not have arisen if they were still subjugated under the institution of slavery.

Aside from the timing of her reunion with Paul D, the reason Sethe is able to share with Paul D, when she hasn’t had company for years, is because he does not judge her as others do. Judith Lewis Herman is also useful here,
in understanding the uniqueness of Paul D's connection with Sethe. She says "The encounter with others who have undergone similar trials dissolves feelings of isolation, shame, and stigma" (Herman 215). Since Paul D and Sethe have both experience social death and coercion because of being enslaved, they are able to help the other feel less alone and less judged. As Sethe considers "trust and rememory" she admits that "her story was bearable because it was his as well – to tell, to refine and tell again. The things neither knew about the other – the things neither had word-shapes for – well, it would come in time..." (Beloved 99). Sethe knows that Paul D's story with confused subjectivity and intellectual symbols that threaten identity is similar to her own, and this gives her the confidence that they will be able to help each other and understand despite lacking the language to express their trauma.

Ernst Van Alphen's writing is also helpful in thinking about what Paul D offers Sethe. He says that "Memory isn't something we have, but something we produce as individuals sharing a culture" (van Alphen 37). Van Alphen's point about creating a memory as part of sharing a culture with other individuals fits well with our understanding of Paul D's relationship with Sethe. He has his own trauma, and yet is willing to listen to Sethe's and lay his story down beside hers so that their collage of fragmented or "individual" memories can create something that coheres (Beloved 273).

Van Alphen elaborates on the idea that narrating or entering into discourse about memory integrates the individual experience into a
communal or cultural history. He quotes Joan W. Scott, who says “since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual.”

So the discourse which Paul D invites Sethe into, and the subsequent telling that the trauma, Beloved, commands not only serves the purpose of narrating in a way that restores subjectivity and coherence but also helps restore the individual to a historical context and community.

Similar to van Alphen’s statement that experience does not occur in a vacuum, Herman reiterates that part of what makes something traumatic is its severing connections with community. Trauma severs connections because the survivor is unable to express the fullness and depth of the traumatic experience. The lack of ability to communicate about trauma, coupled with the shattering of common beliefs in safety and subjectivity, cause feelings of profound loneliness and of not belonging. So part of recovering from trauma would have to involve a kind of reparation of communication and bonds with others as well as a reconciliation with a shared system of meaning. Herman explains the following:

Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others… Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bear witness and affirms. (Herman 214)

Locating her history as part of Beloved’s far reaching memory of middle passage is one way that Sethe’s experience is taken out of the isolation or the “vacuum” created by inassimilable trauma. Another way Sethe is able to

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break through her loneliness and stigma is by finding “word shapes” and language for her traumatic memories. Naming her experience with the symbolic order available also makes it accessible for an audience beyond the individual. This helps her to integrate the trauma as part of a continuous narrative about her life before, which easily existed in plain language. In addition to finding continuity for her own life through language, the discourse she engages in allows her to reestablish connections and communication so that she is able to be part of a community again.

If we reconsider the Orlando Patterson’s enumeration of how excising members of the community contributes to “social death,” it becomes clear why having an experience received and witnessed by a group would be necessary for healing. Group recognition and relation to the victimized individual reverses the feeling of otherness and brings the outcast back into social life. Laurie Vickroy’s argument coincides nicely with Patterson’s when she says that declaring certain members of the African-American community as outcast is an attempt to dissociate from the truth of the community’s own situation. She argues that the outcasts are “merely extreme examples of the larger group’s own abasement by white culture” (Vickroy 92). We have evidence that Vickroy’s statement is true in Sethe’s case because at least two of the characters in her community had killed their loved ones in response to the harsh predicaments of slavery. Ella allowed her children from being raped by “the lowest yet” to die by intentional neglect, and Stamp Paid killed his wife after she had been taken to be raped by their Master (Beloved 256,
233). Rather than empathizing, when the community had the capacity to understand Sethe’s rage, characters like Ella declare “I ain’t got no friends take a handsaw to their own children” (Beloved 187). Vickroy explains that communities who cast out certain members “lack an ability to recognize themselves and their own experience in the outcasts they shun” (Vickroy 95). She also cites Herman, who explains that “Repression, dissociation and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness” (Herman 9). Since dissociation and denial occur not only within Sethe’s conscious but on the larger scale in her community, integration and reclamation has to occur on both personal and social levels.

Spiller’s idea that the socio-ethical is a necessary component in the healing process echoes Patterson’s and Vickroy’s idea that community integration is a vital part of healing (All the Things 384). Community is necessary not only for providing historical and cultural context, which adds perspective that helps to make larger sense of traumatic events, but also because it can reverse the shame, social death, and stigma which the system of slavery caused even peers to inflict on one another.

Sharing stories and exchanging experience is, therefore, a prominent source of enrichment and healing throughout Beloved. One of the ways in which we see that taking on another’s experience can be reparative is when Sethe accepts the fact that her husband, Halle, was there during the assault when her milk was stolen. When Sethe learns that Halle was witness to her traumatic abuse, she gets angry. It may be that she is angry because she
cannot bear witness to his pain; she is already brimming with her own
sadness. She says:

I am still full of that, God damn it, I can’t go back and add more. Add my
husband to it, watching, above me in the loft – hiding close by – the one
place he thought no one would look for him, looking down on what I
couldn’t look at at all. And not stopping them – looking and letting I
happen...there is also my husband squatting by the churn smearing butter
as well as its clabber all over his face because the milk they took is on his
mind. *(Beloved 70)*

She is also mad because he could not do anything to stop it: even though she
was not alone, she was doubly powerless because both she and her husband
were too overcome to defend themselves. Sethe realizes that every day of
Halle’s life is smeared with the thick butter of his memory, and that this has
probably killed him. Although we do not hear about Halle recovering from
this trauma, we do see something shift in Sethe when she is able to bear
witness to his pain. His experience not only validates the horror she suffered;
it also allows her to understand the ramifications of what happened to her in
a more broad sense. It did not affect her alone; it also ruined her husband’s
life and bearing the truth of that helps Sethe carry on, make room for another
perspective even though she was initially too caught up in her own pain to
recognize that any one else was there. Her ability to accept Halle’s experience
helps her to heal; by witnessing she gains a more rich perspective on her own
memory.

Another example of witnessing as a means for healing takes place in
the clearing with a ceremony led by Baby Suggs Holy. The scene opens with
a plea for children, men, and women to listen to and watch each other:
'Let the children come!...let your mothers hear you laugh... let the grown men come... let your wives and your children see you dance...’ Finally she called the women to her. ‘Cry,’ she told them. ‘For the living and the dead...’ and without covering their eyes the women let loose. It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried... *(Beloved 87)*

Something transformational and wonderful happens when the families listen to each member laugh, dance, and cry: they identify with the others’ experiences so much that their emotions are mixed up with the others. The act of witnessing, then, allows one to feel what the other does, and, as Vickroy suggests, to recognize the self in the other. This scene reveals that when we accept the truth of another’s experience by witnessing their joy or sadness, we incorporate their experience into our own on an individual and communal level. This spiritual scene in the clearing suggests that healing movement from pain to happiness is possible when we listen, watch, and witness for another; empathy turns tears to laughter.

Bearing witness in a personal way provides help with the pieces of memory and pain that make no sense and are too much to hold alone; a witness helps hold the pieces together and absorbs some of the pain. Judith Lewis Herman importance of group dynamics or group therapy for healing: “The group as a whole has a capacity to bear and integrate traumatic experience that is greater than that of any individual member, and each member can draw upon the shared resources of the group to foster her own integration” (Herman 216). We see the power of a group bearing witness in the way Herman describes, when the women of the community transform the
situation of grief into one of validation and empowerment during their confrontation of Sethe’s trauma, Beloved, toward the end of the novel.

When the women find Sethe, she is tormented by Beloved who has assumed the image of a pregnant woman. In response to Julia Kristeva’s writing, Linda Koolish remarks that pregnancy represents a woman’s “self and other which is in fact experienced as an aspect of self within her own body” (Koolish 182). If we consider that Sethe is “joining” her dissociated pain, and reclaiming the traumatic parts of her history as “hers,” the pregnancy that Beloved embodies is Sethe’s incorporation of a trauma that had been “other” into her own experience of self.

The women of the town, as witnesses both to Sethe’s past predicament and her present pain, are able to absorb some of her trauma. Because they were witnesses to the murder, by hearing about it and living in the community, they have the authority to denounce its hold on their present society. The women’s presence in front of 124 explicitly reminds the reader of the spiritual power of witness we learned about from Baby Suggs: “For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves... it broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (Beloved 261). The women’s prayer and moaning invoke the spirit that Baby Suggs Holy cultivated: one of ceremonial healing, through taking one woman’s sorrow and claiming it as part of the collective society. Just as family members cried and laughed in response to the others dancing, these women accept Sethe’s burden and tears in return for which she feels “baptized” by
their singing. Their singing becomes her salvation and her pain their moans.
The absorption of pain into the community, and the integration of trauma into a larger society is the epitome of what Herman suggests the group dynamic is capable of delivering: support for the individual when her own history is too alive and too present for her to bear.

Critics have tended to read this scene as an “exorcism” of the “ghost” that they believe Beloved to be (Henderson, Peterson). Other than the fact that Beloved is more substantial than a specter, the problem with framing this scene as an exorcism of a ghost is that it is not clear what happens when Beloved disappears. In fact, some critics have pointed out, as Pamela Barnett does, that “Beloved never definitely leaves, not even at the end of the novel” (Barnett 420). Still others, like Bouson, have remarked on the fact that the past which Beloved represents remains, “lingering in the collective racial memory,” despite the narrator’s “ironic” directive that “This is not a story to pass on” (Bouson 161, Beloved 275). Since it is unclear whether Beloved leaves, this scene cannot be considered to be an exorcism that forever rids Sethe and the community of all that Beloved represents.

It is true that Beloved is no longer present or tangible because the women witnesses absorbed some of the pain caused by the traumatic "rememories," thereby giving Sethe the strength to overcome her shame and alienation. On the other hand, Sethe does not appear to be completely healed and happy when she is spared from living with her trauma on a daily basis. If we turn to Judith Lewis Herman’s description of the various stages of
recovery from trauma, we may find a better way of categorizing what happens to Beloved after the women come to bear witness. Herman admits that “peaceable day-to-day existence may feel strange, especially to survivors who... are experiencing normality for the first time” (Herman 203). In contrast to the intensity of emotion and pressure on the psyche, life after trauma can at first feel empty. Herman goes on to explain that “resolution is never complete” with trauma, but that “it is often sufficient for the survivor to turn her attention from the tasks of recovery to the tasks of ordinary life” (Herman 212). This is what we see Sethe on the verge of doing in her scene with Paul D toward the end. She is weak from having searched for “word shapes” to describe the parts that had been to painful to consider as hers before. She appears defeated and, like someone suffering from Constriction, cannot plan for the future or see a life for herself beyond the bed. Slowly, though, she focuses on the ordinary, mundane part of life, like Herman suggests. She wonders how Paul D would bathe her and, section by section, she focuses on the different parts of her body that are still in tact “First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back...” (Beloved 272). Sethe’s ability to catalogue the different parts of her body is a sign, not only that she is reestablishing her self consciousness, but more importantly that her focus has shifted from a reliving of the past to the physical, concrete, happenings of the present moment.

Paul D urges Sethe to realize that she is whole, that “she is [her] own best thing,” and that her good parts weren’t taken away by the trauma she
suffered (*Beloved* 273). What Paul D encourages Sethe to admit is similar to Herman’s stage of “reconciling with oneself” in her chapter on reconnection. Herman explains that “this simple statement – ‘I know I have myself’ – could stand as the emblem of the third and final stage of recovery. The survivor no longer feels possessed by her traumatic past; she is in possession of herself” (Herman 202). Herman cites psychologist Mary Harvey’s seven “criteria” for healing from trauma, which are of particular relevance to Sethe’s future at the end of the book:

First, the physiological symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder have been brought within manageable limits. Second, the person is able to bear the feelings associated with traumatic memories. Third, the person has authority over her memories: she can elect both to remember the trauma and to put memory aside. Fourth, the memory of the traumatic event is a coherent narrative, linked with feeling. Fifth, the person’s damaged self-esteem has been restored. Sixth, the person’s important relationships have been reestablished. Seventh and finally, the person has reconstructed a coherent system of meaning and belief that encompasses the story of the trauma” (Herman 213).

These criteria are helpful for our understanding of what happens, instead of resolution, when someone is overcoming their trauma. We see still see Sethe suffering from PTSD symptoms, as she had before Beloved came, but the Constriction is not as paralyzing as the isolation inflicted by Beloved’s living presence. In this sense, she meets the first criterion. Sethe can imagine Paul D bathing her, and herself telling him her story; this also suggests that she has some authority over her memory. Rather than experiencing the memory of what she wants to articulate, she is imagining the telling of these memories. Her authority over memory has shifted; she is not being ruled by flashbacks, she is choosing to revisit the memories in a dialogue with Paul D. Although
Sethe worries that her parts won’t hold together, just as Beloved had been afraid that she would “fly apart.” Sethe can conceive of finding a way to tell her story to Paul D (Beloved 272). Sethe’s desire to communicate more of her experience to Paul D corresponds the fourth criterion of having a coherent narrative, linked with feeling, in that she wants to tell him about being left and almost abandoned by Amy Denver. These are elements of the story which Sethe had not spoken of before, because they have to do with feeling of shame which she, most likely, had not been able to feel because of Constriction. Sethe is also beginning to reestablish her relationships with Denver and Paul D, both of whom she has accepted back into her life as, and who in turn are caring for her at the end.

Conclusion:

By comparing the ways in which Sethe demonstrates symptoms of PTSD, we are able to understand the depth and dimension of her interior life. Beloved takes shape because of the dialogue that Sethe enters into with Paul D as witness. Figuring Beloved as Sethe’s trauma helps us to see how memory can be simultaneously representative of history and alive in a survivor’s life. Beloved’s memories of the boat in Middle Passage provide a context for Sethe’s trauma, so that it resonates throughout history and is not experienced in isolation. Witnessing, as enacted by Paul D and by the thirty women who approach Sethe’s house, provides dynamics of group therapy which integrates the individual pain into the larger community, and undoes

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9 Beloved has difficulty keeping her body parts together when Sethe is gone (Beloved p 131)
the social branding of "otherness" which further alienates victims of slavery. Although Beloved is not exorcized or even extinguished by Sethe’s social resurrection and reintegration into community, a comparison of Sethe’s state in the novel’s conclusion with the various criteria for recovery and healing from trauma gives a sense of resolution and victory over the trauma which had previously overtaken her. Sethe is on the verge of recovery, both because Beloved has been re-associated into her consciousness, and because the community is able to recognize themselves in Sethe’s trauma and in all that the trauma represents in relation to themselves. The hope of being able to relate her story to others, to break through the limits of American semiotics, shows that Sethe has moved beyond the traumatized impulses which had prevented her from imagining a future or from socializing outside of her house. Sethe is also able to overcome the isolation and stigma which was imposed by slavery and perpetuated by her community’s denial. In addition to providing tools for tracing the affects of intellectual and social domination which occurred in slavery, the various symptoms of trauma and stages of recovery provide a valuable reference for understanding the initial limitations and ultimate profundity of Sethe’s character and the unveiled history which she represents.
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Dissertations