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Traumatic Legacies in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

This paper delves into a detailed exploration of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, focusing on trauma, memory, identity, and the enduring legacy of slavery on African Americans. It highlights Morrison's role in giving voice to the silenced experiences of the African Americans. This research further analyzes how Morrison's narratives confront readers with the impact of trauma on African American lives, emphasizing the complexities of oppression and the lasting effects of trauma. It also delves into the intricate interplay between trauma and individual and collective identities, drawing insights from Morrison's portrayal of characters grappling with questions of belonging, self-worth, and the interplay of race, gender, and history. Moreover, the paper examines the role of memory in understanding trauma, discussing its various forms and its significance in shaping individual and collective identities. It explores the unreliability of memory, the mechanisms of repression and suppression, and the complexities of remembering traumatic experiences, drawing on the theoretical foundations of trauma studies

and memory studies. The paper also explores how Morrison's work invites readers to engage in a continuous process of meaning-making, emphasizing community support and dialogue in confronting the legacies of trauma

Keywords: trauma, memory, identity, legacy of slavery, the silenced, suppression

الموروثات المؤلمة في رواية "المحبوبة" لتوني مورسن

يقوم هذا البحث بدراسة تفصيلية لرواية "المحبوبة" لتوني مورسن، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على الموضوعات المتعلقة بالصدمة والذاكرة والهوية، وكذلك على الإرث المستمر للعبودية على الأمريكيين الأفارقة. يسلط البحث الضوء على دور مورسن في إعطاء صوت لتجارب الأمريكيين الأفارقة المهمشين. كما يحلل البحث كيف تواجه سردية مورسن القراء بتأثير الصدمة على حياة الأمريكيين الأفارقة، مؤكدًا على تعقيدات القمع والآثار المستمرة للصدمة. كما يتعمق في التفاعل المعقد بين الصدمة والهويات الفردية والجماعية، ويستمد إشراقات من تصوير مورسن للشخصيات التي تتصارع مع أسئلة الانتماء والقيمة الذاتية، ومع تداخل العرق والجنس والتاريخ. وعلاوة على ذلك، يفحص البحث دور الذاكرة في فهم الصدمة، ويناقش أشكالها المتنوعة وأهميتها في تشكيل الهويات الفردية والجماعية. يبحث البحث في عدم موثوقية الذاكرة، وفي آليات القمع والكبت، وفي تعقيدات تذكر التجارب الصادمة بالاستناد إلى الأسس النظرية لدراسات الصدمة والذاكرة. كما يستكشف كيف تدعو أعمال مورسن القراء إلى المشاركة في عملية مستمرة لصنع المعنى، مؤكداً على أهمية الدعم المجتمعي والحوار في مواجهة الموروثات المؤلمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صدمة، ذاكرة، هوية، تراث العبودية، المهمشين ، قمع

The essence of being human lies in communication, while the process of dehumanization involves silencing individuals (Petterson 15). This silencing often manifests in the suppression of traumatic knowledge, making its transmission to future generations a complex and intricate process. However, grappling with incomprehensible and disturbing events poses a significant challenge, and the representation of such experiences raises ethical dilemmas about accuracy and sensitivity. In the face of atrocity and suffering, the concept of humanity is tested, prompting a reevaluation of what it means to be human. Silence about traumatic events presents a complex dilemma, balancing faith in humanity with the need to learn from the past to prevent future atrocities. Confronting past horrors, despite causing despair, is crucial for healing and averting future suffering.

Traumatic events inevitably cause deep-seated trauma, affecting individuals, communities, and societies. The field of trauma studies, shaped by various disciplines, examines trauma from diverse angles, including clinical, cultural, and artistic perspectives. While the field initially focused on specific events like the Holocaust, it is expanding to encompass postcolonial traumas, including histories of slavery and racism in America. This paper contributes to this expansion by exploring African American trauma through an analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. By shedding light on the enduring impact of these traumas on individual and collective identities, this examination aims to deepen understanding of African American experiences and their ongoing quest for acknowledgment and justice.

Toni Morrison's novel blends aesthetic beauty with political engagement, as she rejects the separation of art and politics, viewing them as intertwined: "For me, a novel has to be socially responsible as well as very beautiful" (Jones and Vinson 183). Her writing captivates readers with its beauty while revealing the hidden truths of marginalized lives. *Beloved* stands as a powerful testament to the enduring legacy of Black history, memory, trauma, and identity. Morrison's role extends beyond mere entertainment; she gives voice to silenced experiences and serves as a guardian of memory, meticulously recovering and re-presenting an often-erased African American history. From the haunting presence of the murdered baby in *Beloved*, she sheds light on the complex experiences of a people grappling with the legacies of oppression.

Morrison's narrative is deeply rooted in historical data and figures, which serves as inspiration for her characters, infusing her narratives with authenticity and depth. In *Beloved*, the character of Sethe is based on the real-life story of Margaret Garner, a 19th-century Ohio fugitive slave mother. Margaret Garner's tragic story, where she chose to kill her own child rather than see it returned to slavery, becomes a powerful source of inspiration for Morrison's exploration of the enduring legacy of slavery and its devastating impact on individuals and families.

Thus, the inspiration that Morrison draws from real-life experiences of African Americans allows her to create narratives that resonate deeply with the complexities of human relationships, especially love in the legacy of trauma and oppression. Morrison subverts conventional understandings of love in her work. Through her nuanced and often unsettling portrayal of obsessive love in *Beloved*, she takes an unusual approach that reveals the

depth and complexity of this fundamental human emotion. Instead of portraying love as a purely positive force, Morrison explores its darker side, focusing on how excessive love can be destructive and self-sabotaging. In *Beloved*, she examines the powerful bond between a mother and her child, exploring the challenges and sacrifices that come with this love. By focusing on the negative aspects of love, Morrison further expands her examination of human experience, revealing its potential for both beauty and darkness.

Through an examination of *Beloved*, distinct aspect of trauma and its impact on individual and collective identity are explored, offering profound insights into the consequences of historical oppression and the ongoing struggle for self-definition. In *Beloved*, the profound psychological and emotional toll of trauma are unveiled, focusing on the mechanisms of repression, suppression, forgetting, and denial employed by individuals to cope with unbearable memories. Sethe, the protagonist, embodies the devastating impact of slavery on her sense of self, as her fragmented memories and attempts to suppress the traumatic events of her past illuminate the complex ways in which trauma can distort identity and impede healing.

When analyzing trauma, memory plays a crucial role as it is essential to understand how traumatic experiences are stored, retrieved, and how they influence the development of individual and collective identities. Memory, in its various forms such as recurrent, unexpected, unwelcome, fading, or hidden, is a constant presence in any comprehensive study of trauma, especially in works addressing the traumatic past. While memory plays a crucial role in understanding trauma, it is important to acknowledge

its unreliability. It is not a perfect record of the past. Memories can fade, be altered, and even be implanted with false information over time. This is due to the natural processes of forgetting, the influence of emotions and beliefs, and the possibility of external manipulation. This makes it difficult to trust memory as a completely accurate representation of the past. Studies have shown that memories can be manipulated or even created in controlled settings, and everyday experiences demonstrate how imagined events can become ingrained as real memories. This is particularly evident in cases where individuals or groups repeatedly share stories, leading to the false belief that they were present for events they did not actually witness.

While memory is unreliable, both individuals and societies place great value on it. Memory plays a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identity, and its preservation is often seen as essential. When memory begins to fail, as in cases of dementia or Alzheimer's, it is considered a significant loss and met with resistance. However, the relationship with memory is complex, as Paul Ricoeur in his book *Memory, History, Forgetting* defines memory: "a struggle against forgetting" (413), but also a fear of remembering everything. This is particularly evident in the case of trauma. Individuals generally seek to preserve happy memories, allowing them to revisit and experience positive emotions associated with them. However, when it comes to traumatic experiences, Judith Herman argues that the response can vary. Some individuals may prefer to suppress or "banish" (1) these memories to avoid reliving the pain and fear associated with them. Others may find that traumatic memories are deeply ingrained and difficult to erase. Regardless of the individual response,

reliving traumatic experiences is typically unwelcome, and individuals often attempt to avoid or suppress these memories.

In light of the complex relationship with memory, particularly in the context of trauma, several questions arise: Can victims of trauma completely erase their painful experiences? Does repression truly exist? If so, is it the same as forgetting? How do individual and collective desires influence these processes? Traditional trauma studies argue for the existence of repression, a mechanism that hides the impact of trauma in the unconscious to protect the psyche. However, recent voices challenge this view. Richard McNally, in his book *Remembering Trauma*, argues against the traditional concept of repression and proposes the following:

> First, people remember horrific experiences all too well. Victims are seldom incapable of remembering their trauma. Second, people sometimes do not think about disturbing events for long periods of time, only to be reminded of them later. However, events that are experienced as overwhelmingly traumatic at the time of their occurrence rarely slip from awareness. Third, there is no reason to postulate a special mechanism of repression or dissociation to explain why people may not think about disturbing experiences for long periods. A failure to think about something does not entail an inability to remember it (amnesia). (2)

In other words, contrary to traditional views, victims of trauma typically remember their experiences vividly. While individuals may not actively think about traumatic events for extended periods, these memories rarely disappear completely from awareness. The failure to think about something is not equal to forgetting it. Therefore, a specific mechanism of repression is not required to explain why individuals may not actively think about traumatic experiences.

McNally provides evidence from clinical and psychological experiments to support his claim that traumatic memories remain accessible to conscious recall, contradicting previous theories suggesting the opposite. He challenges the notion that traumatic events cannot be properly recorded and remembered due to their overwhelming impact. McNally emphasizes the need to distinguish between an inability to remember and a preference not to remember, and to establish clear terminology for these different processes.

The term "repression" has evolved from its original Freudian meaning of an automatic psychic response protecting the ego to a more contemporary understanding of "trying not to think about something unpleasant" (170). This evolution has led to the development of various terms to differentiate between conscious and unconscious memory suppression. These terms often revolve around the idea of two types of blockages: conscious and unconscious. Conscious blockage involves the individual intentionally suppressing painful memories, while unconscious blockage aligns with the Freudian concept of an automatic psychic mechanism for self-preservation.

While it is important to distinguish between repression (unconscious blockage), suppression (intentional forgetting), and forgetting (natural memory loss), we must also consider the degree of consciousness involved in these processes. Psychoanalytic theorists argue that repression is an automatic but incomplete process, as traumatic memories often resurface after a period of latency. However, McNally takes a more radical stance, arguing that unconscious repression lacks "empirical support"(275) and that traumatic memories tend to be persistent

rather than forgotten. He also suggests that deliberate attempts to forget are often ineffective, as there is a significant difference between trying to block an experience or memory and actually succeeding in doing so.

While McNally argues that forgetting traumatic memories is often due to conscious suppression, rather than unconscious repression, other scholars propose that both conscious and unconscious processes may be involved. Kalí Tal suggests that individuals engage in a form of "subconscious but intentional ignorance," (133-134) choosing not to acknowledge unpleasant experiences. This aligns with my position, acknowledging the role of conscious suppression in Beloved while recognizing that the decision to forget may also stem from a natural instinct for self-preservation. Sometimes, individuals not only suppress memories of traumatic experiences but also actively convince themselves that the events never happened. This is called conscious denial. They may deny having any memories of the trauma or even claim that they were not present at the event. This denial can be motivated by a desire to avoid facing the pain of the trauma or to protect themselves from the curiosity or pity of others.

However, denial can have negative consequences. By refusing to acknowledge the trauma, individuals may be unable to work through it and seek help. This can lead to further emotional distress and difficulty in moving forward from the traumatic experience. Denial of trauma is often linked to silence, as victims may choose not to speak about their experiences due to fear, shame, or an inability to articulate the trauma. This silence can be particularly prevalent in the African American community, where historical and ongoing experiences of racism may contribute to

feelings of shame and a reluctance to speak out. Silence does not necessarily mean an inability to speak about the trauma, but rather an unwillingness to do so. This unwillingness may stem from a desire to protect oneself from further pain or a sense of not being understood or listened to. Toni Morrison's concept of "the unspeakable" captures the difficulty of articulating the experience of trauma and the feelings of shame and powerlessness that often accompany it, which is present in her novel *Beloved*.

Traumatic experiences leave a lasting mark on the brain, even if individuals or communities try to suppress or silence traumatic memories, these memories never truly disappear, and it is important to acknowledge and process them through narrative in order to move forward. They remain imprinted in the brain and are bound to resurface at some point. This can lead to a repetition of the traumatic experiences, as if history is constantly repeating itself. This is why it is crucial to recognize the past and convert it into a coherent narrative that not only testifies to the traumas but also helps individuals and communities gain agency in the present and future.

When individuals or communities fail to acknowledge and process traumatic experiences, the cycles of traumatic violence are likely to repeat themselves. This can be understood as a haunting presence of the past, a ghostly reminder of the suffering and trauma that has not been addressed. Freud's concept of the "uncanny" (Kuo 86) refers to "the once familiar that was defamiliarized through repression and that induced a compulsive return to the same place" (LaCapra 38). This can manifest as a ghostly presence or a phantom that reminds the victim of their past trauma. The "phantom" is not a literal ghost but rather a metaphor for the gaps in

memory created by the silencing of trauma. These gaps are filled by the haunting presence of the unvoiced memories, which can manifest in various ways, including the physical appearance of a ghost-like figure: "what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (Abraham and Torok 171).

The concepts of the "uncanny" and the "phantom" are particularly relevant to the understanding of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. The ghostly presence in the novel can be seen as a representation of the suppressed and unvoiced traumatic memories of the past that have come back to haunt the characters. The novel explores the ways in which traumatic memories, though suppressed or silenced, but still exert a powerful influence on the present, reminding the characters of the suffering and trauma they have experienced. It explores the ways in which these unaddressed traumas can continue to shape the lives of individuals and communities.

While the idea of a group of people automatically repressing the same memories is unrealistic, the concept of collective suppression, or the unspoken agreement within a community to avoid thinking about something painful, can be more plausible. This collective suppression can have a significant impact on the collective memory and the way traumatic events are passed down to future generations. Individual repressions of traumatic events can have repercussions for the entire community. Even if individuals do not explicitly pass on the details of their experiences, the unspoken agreement to avoid the topic can create a gap in collective memory. This gap can then allow for the resurfacing of the hidden trauma in later generations.

Paul Ricoeur states: "individual manifestations of forgetting are inextricably mixed with its collective forms, to the point that the most troubling experiences of forgetting, such as obsession, display their most malevolent effects only on the scale of collective memories" (443-444). This is because even if the specific details of the trauma are not known, the descendants of those who experienced it can still be affected by its unspoken presence, as in the case of individual experiences during slavery. The memory of traumatic events is often passed down in an imperfect form. This is because of the tendency to avoid talking about the trauma and the difficulty of fully understanding and processing it. The concept of collective suppression and the imperfect transmission of memory are relevant to understanding Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*.

The novel explores the ways in which the trauma of slavery continues to affect the lives of African Americans, even after it ended. *Beloved* was once defined by Fei-hsuan Kuo as "the ghost in America's collective memory" (87). This haunting image sums up the central theme of the novel: the enduring presence of slavery's legacy in the American psyche. Slavery, as a big black stain on American history, is hidden and scarcely acknowledged. There is a collective amnesia surrounding the horrors of slavery, a deliberate suppression of a painful past. This act of suppression, however, does not erase the trauma; instead, it allows it to fester and manifest in various ways.

The dedication of the novel to "sixty million and more" emphasizes the vast number of lives lost during the Middle Passage. These individuals, nameless and forgotten, represent the unseen victims of slavery, their stories erased from official narratives. By acknowledging their existence,

Morrison challenges the sanitized version of American history and forces us to confront the true cost of this institution. Slavery as the "unspeakable," highlights the difficulty of confronting and discussing this traumatic history. This silence perpetuates the cycle of denial and prevents healing from occurring. By giving voice to the silenced stories of slaves, *Beloved* attempts to break this silence and encourage a more honest and open dialogue about the past.

The ghost of Beloved embodies the lingering presence of this trauma. She is a constant reminder of the past, its violence, and its enduring impact on the lives of those who survived. Through her character, Morrison explores the psychological and emotional consequences of slavery, demonstrating how the past continues to haunt the present despite its continuous suppression. The mechanisms employed to cope with the unbearable pain of the past ultimately lead to further suffering. The characters of Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Denver, and the community of Cincinnati all exhibit signs of trauma, both individual and collective. Their experiences of loss, violence, and displacement are intertwined with the larger history of slavery, creating a complex web of psychological and social consequences.

Sethe's case exemplifies the complex interplay between personal and collective trauma. Her memories of slavery, her mother's abandonment, and the brutal circumstances surrounding her escape are all linked. Recalling one certainly triggers the others, creating a constant state of emotional turmoil. The haunting presence of the past, both in individual memories and in the collective consciousness, continues to cast a long

shadow over the lives of the characters, shaping their identities and relationships.

In a 1978 interview, Morrison acknowledged that love permeates her novels, stating they are "all about love... people do all sorts of things under its guise." She further said, "With the best intentions in the world we can do enormous harm... lovers and mothers and fathers and sisters." While love is frequently portrayed as a healing and transformative force, Toni Morrison's novel tackles its complexities, revealing its capacity for both tenderness and cruelty. In her work, love often manifests as "tough love," particularly in the relationship between mothers and children. This intense form of love, though seemingly harsh, stems from a profound desire to protect and nurture, even if it necessitates actions that may appear cruel.

In *Beloved*, Morrison lays bare the barbarity of slavery by exposing how it ruthlessly sabotages the sacred bond of intimacy between mothers and children. This disruption underscores the brutality inflicted upon enslaved women, as Gurleen Grewal observes: "*Beloved* makes brutally clear that aside from the 'equality of oppression' that black men and women suffered, black women were also oppressed as women. They were routinely subjected to rape, enforced childbirth, and natal alienation from their children. As Morrison's novel shows, physical abuse is humiliating, but the added emotional pain of a mother is devastating" (100).

Sethe's pursuit of freedom is tragically cut short after twenty-eight days when she is confronted by her past in the form of her former master and slave catchers. Faced with the probability of her children being returned to slavery, she makes the agonizing decision to kill her youngest

daughter, believing it is a merciful act. This traumatic event leaves an inerasable mark on Sethe, trapping her in a cycle of trauma and haunting memories, unable to find peace or escape the relentless grip of her past. Sethe's desperate act of infanticide reveals the devastating impact of slavery's tyranny.

In *Beloved*, the "effort to love" within a system of oppression drives Sethe to the unthinkable. Sethe's love for her children intensifies dramatically when she gains ownership of them, claiming them as her own for the first time after gaining freedom, as she declares to Paul D on how freedom has released her power to love: “Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love” (162).

Andrea O’Reilly mentions Toni Morrison’s emphasis on the crucial role of mothering in shaping a child's well-being, as “in all of her writings Morrison emphasizes how essential mothering is for the well-being of children, because it is the mother who first loves the child and gives that child a loved sense of self. Children who are orphaned, abandoned, or denied nurturant mothering are psychologically wounded as adults” (367). Beloved exemplifies this concept. Sethe's trauma embodies the loss of self, as she projects her "best thing" onto her daughter, Beloved. This fractured sense of self is evident in Sethe's question: "will the parts hold?" (287). Sethe's intense love stems from her own mother's abandonment and her belief that "love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (191). Her trauma is multifaceted, stemming from her birth into slavery and the underlying theme of denied motherhood. Sethe is deeply wounded by her separation

from her mother at a young age. This trauma left her with a fragmented identity and a loss of self.

Sethe's determination to feed her babies, even after enduring torture and sacrificing her own child, is linked to her childhood trauma. Separated from her mother and later abandoned, Sethe's story to Paul D reveals her deep trauma from the violent confiscation of her milk. This experience explains her fierce drive to provide for her children, echoing the longing for care she never received. Her forced separation from her mother explains why she is so driven "to get milk to my baby girl" (16) after Schoolteachers' "boys" take her milk. Despite Paul D's attempts to redirect the conversation, Sethe remains fixated on the traumatic memory of her stolen milk. When he reminds her of their previous discussion about the tree "we was talking 'bout the tree," she continues to talk about those boys who "came in there and took my milk" (25). His questions about the cowhide and her pregnancy elicit the same response, highlighting the profound impact of this event on her psyche:

> "They used cowhide on you?"
> "And they took my milk."
> "They beat you and you was pregnant?"
> "And they took my milk!" (17)

Haunted by past trauma, Sethe vividly remembers her mother's struggles in the fields, leaving her with little or no milk. This experience resonates with her own stolen milk, echoing the sentiment: "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" (231). Her obsession with nurturing her children, even amidst torture and sacrifice, reflects her desperate yearning

to fulfill the role of mother. They represent her "best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean" (289).

Sethe's desperate choice and its lasting impact on her children and community years later exemplify the traumatic legacy of slavery on individual and collective identities, as her past actions continue to haunt her and prevent her from experiencing genuine liberation. Thus, trauma can become a form of bondage, trapping individuals in a cycle of pain, fear, and isolation. Sethe's attempts to repress her memories ultimately backfire, leading to further suffering and a sense of being chained to the past. Traumatic experiences of slavery are the "unspeakable," (69) for the difficulty of confronting and acknowledging them. This silence only amplifies the power of trauma, allowing it to fester and exert its control over the characters' lives. As Sethe herself once tells Paul D, she manages to "get along" because she does not "go inside" (55), that is, she does not dwell on her traumatic past if she can help it.

Sethe's color blindness symbolizes the emotional numbness she experiences as a coping mechanism. Her inability to perceive color reflects her detachment from the vibrancy of life and her focus on survival. This loss of color signifies the way trauma can drain life of its vibrancy and leave individuals feeling emotionally muted.

> Sethe looked at her hands, her bottle-green sleeves, and thought how little color there was in the house and how strange that she had not missed it the way Baby did. Deliberate, she thought, it must be deliberate, because the last color she remembered was the pink chips in the headstone of her baby girl. After that she became as color conscious as a hen. Every dawn she worked at fruit pies, potato dishes and vegetables while the cook did the soup, meat and the rest. And she could not remember a molly

> apple or a yellow squash. 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. (46-47)

However, responses to the trauma of slavery can vary. While Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, seeks solace in contemplation and reflection, Sethe attempts to repress and banish all reminders of her painful past. In her final years, Baby Suggs withdraws from the world and seeks refuge in her room, where she spends her time contemplating "the colors of things" (208).This act can be interpreted as an attempt to find meaning and beauty in a world marred by suffering. By focusing on color, she may be seeking to transcend the limitations of her physical reality and connect with something larger than herself.

In contrast to Baby Suggs, after the unspeakable happened, Sethe engages in a more active form of coping by attempting to repress all memories and reminders of her trauma. This includes banishing color from her life, both literally and figuratively. Her house is described as "grey", and she becomes "color conscious as a hen" (46), unable to recall or acknowledge the vibrant hues of the world around her. Sethe's trauma is connected to the colors red and pink, representing the blood of her murdered child and the pink headstone that marks her grave. These colors become associated with the "unspeakable", the traumatic event that Sethe desperately tries to forget. Her attempt to repress her memories through the elimination of color highlights the limitations of this coping mechanism. Visual reminders of her trauma are everywhere, and her efforts to shut them out only serve to reinforce their hold on her.

Sethe's attempt to block out traumatic memories actually extends to encompass her entire experience of slavery and racism. Her trauma extends beyond the specific event of killing her child. Her entire life before that moment, marked by the horrors of slavery and the constant threat of racist violence, is also deeply traumatizing. These experiences shape her memories and contribute to the overwhelming pain she associates with the past. Because "every mention of her past life hurt" (69), Sethe avoids any mention or remembrance of her past as a coping mechanism. With this avoidance, the 'the unspeakable' extends not only to the specific circumstances surrounding her baby's death but also to her entire history of suffering from racist discrimination and slavery. By suppressing her past, Sethe attempts to protect herself from emotional distress and create a future "of keeping the past at bay" (51)

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault, describes the human body as the site of negotiating political power, an issue Morrison explicitly deals with. From Foucault's perspective, the human body is the central space upon and around which political and social life is arranged:

> "the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. [...] the body becomes a useful body only if it is a productive body and a subjected body" (464).

The brutal rationality at the heart of slavery is personified by Schoolteacher, whose brand of racist pseudoscience is symbolized by his measuring string, used to systematically measure the slaves' facial angles, head shapes and brain sizes. He writes down the collected data to further

corroborate the scientific basis for his power over the slaves and turn white supremacy into legitimate scientific theory, as J. Brooks Bouson points out:

> "A theory that codified the shaming of blacks and white contempt for the 'lower' races, the study of racial differences functioned to give so-called scientific confirmation of the superiority (pride) of the higher and civilized white race and the inferiority (shame) of the lower and degenerate black race" (140)

The schoolteacher therefore embodies the system of White indoctrination of Blacks into losing their sense of self and identity. This makes the school place in *Beloved* not a place of shaping and opening up minds, but a place of dehumanizing brutality working under the principle of intellectual supremacy. Thus, socializing Blacks to feel inherently inferior, Whites were able to maintain their privilege not only through bodily discipline and violence, but more effectively through a hegemonic racial discourse of Black inferiority:

> One of the best ways to instill fear in people is to terrorize them. Yet this fear is best sustained by convincing them that their bodies are ugly, their intellect is inherently underdeveloped, their culture is less civilized, and their future warrants less concern than that of other peoples" (13)

Consequently, the schoolteacher's pseudo-scientific stereotyping of the "animalistic, savage African Other" (159) is the source of Sethe's deepest trauma and the ultimate trigger for killing her daughter, lest they take her with them to raise her as an inferior being.

Sethe's attempts to repress her memories are ultimately futile. The past is inescapable, and even the slightest reminder can trigger intense

emotional pain. As a result, she lives in a constant state of fear and anxiety, always on guard against the resurfacing of her trauma. Her decision to kill her child is a direct result of the trauma she has endured throughout her life. The overwhelming pain and fear associated with her past lead her to a desperate act in an attempt to protect her children from a similar fate. By extending the concept of the "unspeakable" to encompass Sethe's entire experience of slavery and racism, the legacy of slavery is not merely a personal burden but a collective wound that continues to shape the lives of Black Americans.

Denver's awareness of her mother's pain and her willingness to respect her boundaries demonstrate the importance of empathy and understanding in supporting those who have experienced trauma:

> "Denver knew that her mother was through with it—for now anyway. The single slow blink of her eyes; the bottom lip sliding up slowly to cover the top; and then a nostril sigh, like the snuff of a candle flame—signs that Sethe had reached the point beyond which she would not go" (45).

However, *Beloved* expands the discussion of repression and denial beyond the individual level to encompass the broader societal response to trauma, specifically focusing on the historical amnesia surrounding slavery, and similarly the paradox of how a widely known event like Sethe's infanticide can become a secret, whispered behind closed doors. This secrecy serves to protect the perpetrators and maintain the illusion of normalcy, while simultaneously silencing the victim and perpetuating the trauma: "How did information that had been in the newspaper become a

secret that needed to be whispered in a pig yard? A secret from whom? Sethe, that's who" (199).

A parallel can be drawn between Sethe's infanticide and the institution of slavery, both of which are shrouded in secrecy and silence. This is what Morrison termed as "national amnesia" (257) and what Kaplan refers to as "national forgetting" (66), serves to protect the dominant group from confronting the uncomfortable truths of their past and perpetuates the cycle of oppression. Thus, the act of forgetting is often imposed by the perpetrator of the trauma, who benefits from maintaining the status quo and silencing the voices of the oppressed. This dynamic is evident in the case of slavery, where the perpetrators actively suppressed any discussion of the atrocities committed. (67)

For a long time, the horrors of slavery were deliberately silenced and excluded from the dominant historical narrative. Shame and guilt prevented open discussion, and it is only recently that works like Toni Morrison's have begun to confront this difficult topic directly. The novel uses powerful symbols to represent the enforced silence, such as Paul D's iron bit and Sethe's self-inflicted tongue injury caused by a lashing. Significantly, the "official" history of slavery is written by the perpetrators themselves, using the very ink produced by Sethe's labor. While the institution's proponents would naturally want to suppress such a dark stain on their history, even outsiders like Europeans might have chosen to remain silent.

Toni Morrison's narrative doesn't simply describe traumatic events from violent times. Instead, it capture the essence of these experiences, including the emotions, sensations, and psychological impact that are often

difficult to articulate. This approach allows readers to connect with the events on a deeper level and understand their lasting impact. It also has an initiatory value, meaning they evoke a sense of injustice and suffering in the reader, opening them up to a new understanding of the events and their historical context. This unique witnessing process helps readers confront the complexities of history and their own humanity.

By working within a traumatic timeframe, Morrison's texts recall the presence of the past among readers. The events revealed in her narrative reach out to readers, activating feelings of unease and shock, making them confront the haunting impact of these historical atrocities. Morrison uses figural language to capture and reveal the horrors of trauma, rather than simply describing them. This approach allows her to evoke the emotional impact of these events on a deeper level, influencing the reader's understanding and perception.

In *Women Writers at Work*, Toni Morrison emphasizes how the bit had a "very personal quality for the person who made it, as well as for the person who wore it''. Recognizing the limitations of mere description, Morrison asserts, "I realized that describing [the bit] would never be helpful." Instead, she aims to evoke the emotional impact of the experience, stating, "I realized that the reader didn't need to see it so much as feel what it was like." Thus, Morrison's deliberate choice to make slavery feelable rather than visually present is evident in her use of the "bit" as a symbol of dehumanization and suffering. Morrison believes that it is "important to imagine the bit as an active instrument, rather than simply as a curio or an historical fact" (357). By focusing on the emotional and psychological

impact of this device, she conveys the personal and intimate experience of slavery in a way that resonates with the reader.

As Sethe delves into her memories of the "bit," this cruel device to silence slaves, she becomes acutely aware of Paul D's profound pain. The following passage captures her thoughts and words as she engages in a conversation with him:

> He wants to tell me, she thought. He wants me to ask him about what it was like for him—about how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it. She already knew about it, had seen it time after time in the place before Sweet Home. Men, boys, little girls, women. The wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. Days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye. Sethe looked up into Paul D's eyes to see if there was any trace left in them. "People I saw as a child," she said, "who'd had the bit always looked wild after that. Whatever they used it on them for, it couldn't have worked, because it put a wildness where before there wasn't any. When I look at you, I don't see it. There ain't no wildness in your eye nowhere." (71)

Despite the overwhelming evidence, slavery's atrocities remained largely unacknowledged, as if they were simply not a story worth telling. This silence can be attributed to various factors: disdain for the enslaved, fear of the truth, guilt for allowing it to happen, or even pity for the victims.

Thus, the unresolved trauma surrounding slavery stems from silence, a collective silence, that permeates the American society, the community of Cincinnati in Beloved, and even Sethe herself. This intentional suppression prevents a proper confrontation with the past and

hinders the healing process. Paul D is another character who also grapples with the trauma of slavery and employs similar mechanisms of repression to cope.

Paul D, like Sethe, is deeply affected by his experiences as a slave. He carries the physical and emotional scars of his past, including the loss of loved ones, the brutality of the masters, and the psychological manipulation of the institution itself. Like Sethe, he chooses to repress his painful memories rather than confront them, as he decided to "shut down a generous portion of his head" (49), and he metaphorically stores these memories in a "tobacco tin"(71) in his chest, keeping them locked away and out of sight. This mechanism allows him to function in the present but prevents him from fully healing from his trauma:

> "It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open" (133)

Repression, while offering temporary relief, ultimately fails to provide true healing. Paul D's memories continue to haunt him, and the "tobacco tin" in his chest becomes a heavy burden that he carries with him wherever he goes: "He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (77).

Paul D, like other enslaved people, endured immense suffering. He experienced the cruelty of various masters, the heartbreak of failed escape attempts, and the loss of friends and loved ones. He carries the burden of witnessing the brutal torture and death of one friend and the subsequent

insanity of another. He also grapples with the shame of being subjected to dehumanizing punishments like the iron bit and chain gang. After emancipation, Paul D struggles to find stability and connection, haunted by the lessons of slavery. He avoids forming deep attachments, believing that loving too much invites pain and loss. He views Sethe's intense love for her children as a dangerous vulnerability, fearing the inevitable heartbreak she will face:

> Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left for the next one. (54)

Obviously, Paul D has a complex relationship with love and trauma, with a paradox between the desire for connection and the fear of further loss, as slavery has a profound impact on Paul D's life, shaping his worldview and making him wary of forming deep attachments.

His fear of loss stems from his traumatic experiences. He has learned that love can be easily taken away, leaving him vulnerable and heartbroken. This fear leads him to adopt a philosophy of detachment, believing that it is safer to love "just a little bit" so as to minimize the pain of potential loss. His inability to love fully is not simply a consequence of unresolved trauma, but rather a deliberate choice. This choice resembles the act of voluntary suppression or silence, where he consciously avoids allowing himself to love deeply.

Despite his best intentions, Paul D finds himself falling in love with Sethe. This love offers him a sense of connection and belonging that he has not experienced before. It challenges his previous beliefs and opens him up to the possibility of a different future. By allowing himself to love Sethe, Paul D opens himself up to the possibility of further pain, but he also opens himself up to the possibility of healing and growth, despite the fact that Paul D initially refused to accept the truth about Sethe's infanticide. This denial serves as a defense mechanism, protecting him from the overwhelming pain and emotional turmoil that acknowledging the truth would bring.

When confronted with the news of Sethe's infanticide, Paul D chooses to shut down and refuse to believe it. This reaction suggests a pattern of suppression or denial, where he avoids facing uncomfortable truths**:**

> Paul D slid the clipping out from under Stamp's palm. The print meant nothing to him so he didn't even glance at it. He simply looked at the face, shaking his head no. No. At the mouth, you see. And no at whatever it was Stamp Paid wanted him to know. Because there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear. […] And he said so. 'This ain't her mouth. I know her mouth and this ain' it.' Before Stamp Paid could speak he said it and even while he spoke Paul D said it again. Oh, he heard all the old man was saying, but the more he heard, the stranger the lips in the drawing became. (183)

Paul D claims to be compelled to leave 124 Bluestone Road due to Beloved's haunting presence. However, since the figure of Beloved can be interpreted as the representation and the embodiment of trauma and

repressed memories, particularly the "unspeakable" event of Sethe's infanticide, Paul D's ability to see and interact with Beloved indicates that he may have subconsciously known about Sethe's past all along. He lived with this knowledge but chose to suppress it, despising both the memory and himself for being drawn to it.

In addition, his sexual encounter with Beloved triggers a release of the repressed trauma, symbolized by the opening of his "tobacco tin" and the pain he experiences in his "bleeding red heart." This revelation causes him immense shame and guilt. Thus, the burden of knowing both Sethe's and his own secrets becomes too much for Paul D to bear, driving him to flee the house. His departure can be seen as a desperate attempt to escape the overwhelming emotional weight of the past.

However, the discussion of trauma and repression expands beyond individual characters to explore the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the enduring presence of the repressed, as the character of Beloved is a symbol of repressed trauma, not only for Sethe and Paul D but also for Baby Suggs. Her presence represents the collective pain and suffering endured by generations of enslaved people, passed down through families and communities.

Trauma can reverberate across generations, affecting not only the individuals who directly experienced the traumatic event but also their children and grandchildren. Baby Suggs' loss of her children and Sethe's infanticide have lasting consequences for their family, shaping their identities and relationships. Baby Suggs, demonstrates a tendency to

suppress painful memories and emotions to protect herself from emotional distress. This is evident in her selective recollection of her firstborn child:

> My first-born," she says. "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.'" To which Sethe knowingly replies: "'That's all you let yourself remember'" (6)

Similarly, when receiving news of the deaths of two daughters, Baby Suggs exhibits an infantile reaction, suggesting a denial or refusal to fully process the loss:

> Nancy and Famous died in a ship off the Virginia coast before it set sail for Savannah. That much she knew. The overseer at Whitlow's place brought her the news, more from a wish to have his own way with her than from the kindness of his heart. The captain waited three weeks in port, to get a full cargo before setting off. Of the slaves in the hold that didn't make it, he said, two were Whitlow pickaninnies name of . . . But she knew their names. She knew, and covered her ears with her fists to keep from hearing them come from his mouth. (169)

Repression and denial can become ingrained in families and communities that have experienced trauma. Baby Suggs' resolution of denial and not to love too much, reflects her coping mechanism, a defense against the deep-seated trauma of repeated loss. While she physically survived the horrors of slavery at the cost of busted "legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue" (92), her psychological damage resulting from the repeated loss of her children is more profound.

Morrison emphasizes the impossibility of forming a family and intimate personal connections within the context of slavery, leading to an inner void and a fractured sense of self. In a world where the threat of

abandonment looms large, where forging connections inevitably leads to heartbreak, Baby Suggs' love has no place. The ever-present trauma of loss casts a long shadow over any potential for genuine connection, leaving her emotionally isolated and unable to fully embrace the vulnerability that love requires. This loss of self is evident in Baby Suggs' acknowledgment of the "self that was no self" (147). Without roots in the past or future, family or community, she lacks a foundation for grounding herself in the world.

Baby Suggs, Paul D, and Denver share a common tendency towards denial as a coping mechanism for dealing with trauma. Baby Suggs refuses to confront the painful memories of her children's deaths. Similarly, Paul D avoids acknowledging the truth of Sethe's infanticide and suppresses his own traumatic experiences. Denver, mirroring her grandmother and Paul D, exhibits a form of denial by choosing to ignore the truth about her early life, symbolized by her selective deafness. This shared pattern of avoidance highlights the complex ways in which individuals cope with trauma, often seeking temporary relief from pain at the expense of confronting the full reality of their experiences**.**

Denver's denial is selective, as she chooses to focus on the positive aspects of her early life while blocking out the traumatic events that occurred. This form of denial allows her to maintain a sense of normalcy and avoid the overwhelming pain associated with the truth. Despite Denver's efforts to suppress the traumatic memories, they remain present in her subconscious, manifesting in her deafness and her intense connection to the ghost of her sister. This suggests that trauma cannot be fully erased, even through denial, and can continue to exert a powerful influence on

individuals' lives, as external triggers can bring repressed memories to the surface, even after years of denial.

Denver's encounter with the boy at school forces her to confront the truth about her past, shattering her carefully constructed world, a seemingly innocent question from a boy triggers a realization in Denver, bringing to the surface a truth that had been lying dormant within her all along: "But the thing that leapt up in her when he asked it was a thing that had been lying there all along" (121). This knowledge, described as a "thing" that leaps up, had been hidden in a state of darkness, yet it was always present and waiting to be revealed. The boy's question acts as a catalyst, prompting Denver to confront a truth that she had previously chosen to ignore or suppress. This experience highlights the power of external stimuli to bring to light hidden truths and the potential for even seemingly insignificant events to trigger profound realizations.

However, Denver demonstrates a remarkable capacity for self-awareness and a willingness to confront her own pain. This growth is evident in her decision to distance herself from Beloved and her increasing openness to embracing a future beyond the shadow of the past. She represents a glimmer of hope for the future. As the only character who did not directly experience the horrors of slavery, she embodies the possibility of healing and renewal. Her journey towards overcoming trauma offers a message of resilience and the potential for future generations to break free from the legacy of the past.

Mainly, community and support are important in Denver's healing process and identity formation. While she ultimately finds the strength to

confront her trauma on her own, the presence of Sethe and Paul D provides a sense of belonging and connection that is essential for her growth. The process of healing from trauma is ongoing and requires continuous effort. Even as Denver makes significant progress, she remains vulnerable to the lingering effects of her past experiences. This suggests that the journey towards healing is a lifelong process that requires ongoing support and self-compassion.

The opening lines of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom," are indeed puzzling. In *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, Toni Morrison discusses her intentional use of this disorienting opening line:

> The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense. No lobby, no door, no entrance—a gangplank, perhaps (but a very short one). And the house into which this snatching—this kidnapping—propels one, changes from spiteful to loud to quiet, as the sounds in the body of the ship itself may have changed. A few words have to be read before it is clear that 124 refers to a house, . . . and a few more have to be read to discover why it is spiteful, or rather the source of the spite. By then it is clear, if not at once, that something is beyond control, but is not beyond understanding, since it is not beyond accommodation by both the "women" and the "children." The fully realized presence of the haunting is both a major incumbent of the narrative and sleight of hand. One of its purposes is to keep the reader preoccupied with the nature of the incredible spirit world while being supplied a controlled diet of

> the incredible political world. … The subliminal, the underground life of a novel is the area most likely to link arms with the reader and facilitate making it one's own. . . . Here I wanted the compelling confusion of being there as they (the characters) are; suddenly, without comfort or succor from the "author," with only imagination, intelligence, and necessity available for the journey. (228-229)

However, the novel does not end in despair. Instead, from spitefulness to tenderness, it concludes with a glimmer of hope and a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, highlighting the importance of community and support in the healing process, sharing experiences to create a space for understanding, empathy, and mutual support:

> "Sethe," he says, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."
> He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are holding hers.
> "Me? Me? (273)

Morrison's *Beloved*, grappling with the aftermath of trauma, resist closure and definitive interpretations. Its open-ended narrative reflects the ongoing nature of trauma and its impact on individuals and communities. Meaning is not revealed through a single proposition but through ongoing dialogue and engagement with the text, emphasizing the importance of multiple perspectives and interpretations.

This work prioritizes truthfulness over a singular, absolute truth, acknowledging the subjective and multifaceted nature of experience. It invites readers to engage in a continuous process of meaning-making rather than seeking a definitive answer. The open-ended nature of the narrative also reflects the need for social exchange and communal embrace in the

healing process. By involving multiple voices and perspectives, *Beloved* emphasizes the importance of community support and dialogue in confronting the legacies of trauma.

Morrison extends the power to create meaning beyond herself and her characters, including witnesses, companions, and even fictional figures. This acknowledges the collective nature of experience and the importance of diverse voices in shaping our understanding of the past. Ultimately, her work invites readers to actively participate in the creation of meaning, moving to places where meaning might exist and gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities of trauma and its impact on individuals and communities identities.

While Morrison's work presents a bleak outlook on the future, it also offers a call for upcoming possibilities. it emphasizes the importance of remaining connected to our pasts, histories, ancestors, and communities while acknowledging the need for a more responsible and inclusive future community, highlighting the consequences of exclusion and denial. It suggests that building a better community will be an ongoing and incomplete process, one that must remain open to the difference of the other and the possibility of unfamiliar others and not yet imagined modes of being.

Morrison's testimonial work is addressed to communities of readers, both present and future, aiming to engage them in a dialogue about the possibilities for creating a more just and equitable society. This work resonates in the present by reminding us of the failures of the past and prompting us to consider alternative ways of being in the world. It serves

as a reminder of histories and past stories that have failed to achieve true happiness and lasting peace: "how exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin imagination became trying to achieve it" (Morrison 307), challenging us to learn from these failures and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Morrison calls for a future based on non-exclusionary forms of solidarity, where individuals are recognized and valued for their unique contributions to the community. This requires a shift away from self-interested individualism and towards a more inclusive and compassionate approach to building a better future.

Morrison emphasizes the importance of values such as acceptance, companionship, and connection in shaping a more just and equitable society. These values promote inclusivity, empathy, and a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of all members of the community. By reminding us of our shared humanity and our responsibility for shaping a better future, Toni Morrison's trilogy offers a powerful call to action for individuals and communities alike:

> There is a certain kind of peace that is not merely the absence of war. The peace I am thinking of is not at the mercy of history's rule, nor is it a passive surrender to the status quo. The peace I am thinking of is the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one. (4)

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