Peace by Piece: Communicating Trauma and Truth in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree

Master of Arts
In
English: Literature

by

Samantha Jo Wainwright
San Francisco, California
May 2022
Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Peace by Piece: Communicating Trauma and Truth in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* by Samantha Jo Wainwright, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English: Literature at San Francisco State University.

__________________________________________
Meg Schoerke, Ph.D.
Professor,
Thesis Committee Chair

__________________________________________
Kathleen De Guzman, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
This thesis presents close analysis of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* as a text that exemplifies the power of literature to reflect multiple rhetorical purposes at the same time: to use literary techniques to accurately portray trauma that is so difficult to talk about to the point of vehement denial of its lasting impact on today; to use language and structural elements to effectively draw any reader into the traumatic experience of slavery; to offer a path for Black women in particular to healing and restoration; and to showcase the culturally unique talent suppressed by a literary world dominated by white supremacist notions of “art,” both through Morrison’s own clear brilliance, as well as the historically Black modes of storytelling she highlights throughout the novel. As a high school English teacher, I look to novels like *Beloved* as essential tools in influencing a more empathetic society.
Acknowledgements

My parents taught me to love stories. What I know about stories is that they are the record of humanity: that which makes us human. To have that basic understanding that we – all humans – have a story, full of humor, heartbreak, joys, and struggles, is essential to the healing of animosity, fear, and competition amongst us in society. For these values, and too many other gifts to name, I am eternally grateful for the parenting of Mark and Mary-Jo Wainwright.

My inheritance of stories led me here: to be a high school English teacher; to seek my Masters’ degree in literature; to write a thesis about the essential need for stories – and the need to recognize stories in seemingly unusual form – and understand what they are teaching us. I am among those English teachers who view the teaching of empathy as the highest priority. Our nation’s collective education in empathy will set us free.

Deep gratitude goes out to the San Francisco State English Department professors who guided me through this process with incredible patience and enthusiastic support, Drs. Meg Schoerke and Kathleen De Guzman.

To all those most profound influences on my thinking on these topics along the journey of my life so far, thank you for allowing me to learn from you, whether you knew it or not.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**  
Thesis Overview  
17

**Chapter 1: Scarred and Shattered**  
Trauma Theory and Beloved  
The Scars of Slavery  
Shattered Lives, Families, and Communities  
The Futility of Repression  
Chapter Conclusion  
44  
48

**Chapter 2: Rememories and Restitchings**  
Is Healing Possible?  
America’s Ghosts  
Morrison’s Ghost Story  
The Story to Pass On  
Chapter Conclusion  
51  
51  
52  
56  
67  
77

**Conclusion**  
81

**Works Cited**  
85
Introduction

One autumn 2020 day in my 11th grade American literature class, my students and I were on Zoom discussing a 2008 NPR radio piece about the historical legacy of the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* when the utter necessity of teaching historical truths and social justice through literature crystallized before me.

The context for that day’s lesson is a unit in which students analyze the rhetorical appeals of 19th century authors and orators who participated in America’s first nation-wide movement for social justice in the fight to Abolish slavery. Students had previously analyzed speeches by Frederick Douglass, John Brown, Sojourner Truth, and others, as well as excerpts from Douglass’ galvanizing autobiographical narrative exposing the horrors of his life in slavery. The rhetoric unit culminates in a comparison between the truth of slavery portrayed in Douglass’ narrative and the heavily dramatized “truths” portrayed in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s infamous novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, analyzing the rhetorical strategies employed by each author to persuade 19th century white American readers that slavery’s human cost far outweighed its economic benefits.

So, Stowe’s sentimental 1850s novel was the topic of that particular class period, starting with a discussion about the NPR piece, an interview with African American studies professor Patricia Turner. The interview begins with an introduction connecting the topic to recent events in the news of that time and the (still ongoing) movement for reparations for the descendants of enslaved African Americans. In 2008, Democratic Congressman Steve Cohen (TN), introduced a widely supported resolution in Congress to issue an apology to Black Americans on behalf of the
United States government for slavery and Jim Crow and the lasting detrimental impact of those policies on African American communities. Professor Turner then shares her analysis of the evolution of the phrase “Uncle Tom” to refer to a Black person who “sells out” to white people, despite the fact that was not the intended portrayal of Tom’s character in Stowe’s original novel. The social pressure for Black people to assimilate into white culture by “performing” to comply with whites’ norms is unfortunately what turned the title character of the story, in dramatic reenactments of the novel, into the subservient, desperate-to-please-the-master character more commonly thought of when people today hear the phrase “Uncle Tom.” That same pressure is also responsible for the downplaying of our country’s brutally violent history of slavery and discrimination based on race, and that same drive to downplay the effects of racism was inevitably the inspiration for what I was about to see in my English class.

Back in that fateful Zoom call last fall, as the interview recording played and the students listened and took notes about this one specific way (of oh so many) in which the dominant, white-centered narrative of society had subverted the truth of history, I noticed a new comment in the chat window, privately sent to me by a student, asking, and I quote, “Why do we need an apology for slavery when it was completely abolished and racism is gone?” I would learn throughout the year that this student has a penchant for expressing contrarian views in order to attract attention and rile up his mostly liberal-leaning classmates with his inflammatory musings. However, such foolery must also be taken seriously, whether the question is genuinely sincere or some kind of extremely misguided attempt to make a mockery of history. At that moment, I knew that this thesis I had been working on in some form or another for five years, while struggling to figure out what unique perspective I might actually have to offer on this topic, must at its heart be endeavoring to sincerely answer this young man’s question.
An apology traditionally marks a step toward closure of a painful situation, and for maximum effect should be accompanied by some kind of attempt to make the situation right, allowing both sides affected the opportunity to move on with their lives. As we all know, the 2008 Congressional apology was not followed by any kind of attempt to “make it right,” via reparations, effective economic or educational legislation, or any other means, despite what many (mostly white people) may have thought upon the election later that same fall of Barack Obama to the presidency. The wound of slavery on the body politic of our nation is not healed, as evidenced by the subsequent 12-year reaction to Obama’s election to national office: the eventual rise of Donald Trump with his xenophobic mentality and the increase in discriminatory practices and violence visible in the media, leading up to the eruption of protests in summer 2020 following the viral murder of George Floyd and the eventual storming of the United States Capitol by Confederate flag-wielding conspiracy theorists bent on destroying democracy on January 6, 2021. When it comes to our nation’s reckoning with its racist past and the legacy of slavery that permeates the fabric of American society, this century’s newscycle proves time and again we’ve still got a lot of issues to work through.

Amidst this chaos, equally dangerous is the fooling of society’s ignorant masses into thinking “racism is gone,” whether that ignorance is the result of young age and inexperience or the lack of accurate historical information which plagues K-12 education in this country. Without constant attention to the proper cleaning and care of a wound, it is almost scientifically guaranteed that the wound will become infected, fester, rot away the healthy tissue around it, and perhaps destroy the entire person. Toni Morrison, in her Pulitzer Prize winning novel Beloved, which serves as the foundational literary text for this thesis, finds another metaphor to describe the problem, via a supporting character’s third act musings: “Whitepeople believed that whatever
the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. [...] But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it” (198-9). Within this passage, formerly enslaved Stamp Paid describes “this jungle” as the internal complex developed by the futility of trying to prove your worthiness, “how human,” to another group that relies on, economically, socially, systemically, your continued subordination. The end result is everyone, whites included, stuck not really understanding themselves, where they came from, their history, and trying to navigate human relations and political matters without addressing the elephant in the room. Stamp Paid, a character who provides this somewhat objective perspective to help the reader navigate the plot, fittingly ruminates about how the protagonist Sethe’s story has become such a suppressed thing in the community: “How did information that had been in the newspaper become a secret that need to be whispered in a pig yard?” (169). Though the novel centers on a specific set of traumatic experiences for one community of formerly enslaved African-Americans and their descendents, it may as well serve as an allegory for our society’s own baffling denial of and pig-headed obstinance toward learning about history’s plain truths. In the novel, the entire community suffers from interpersonal fracture and social division as a result of this suppression, and the same is true for 21st century citizens of the United States.

Thankfully, in the latest progress in the bending of Dr. King’s “moral arc” toward justice, the past few years have seen an explosion of protests against police brutality and systemic racism; gendered violence and discrimination; unchecked climate change; negligent, too liberal gun laws; and cruel immigration policies. Widespread discussion has correspondingly exploded around the greatest obstacles to social justice: the racial bias of systemic institutions; the
perpetual degradation of women in the eyes and actions of men; the persistence of white, male, Christian, and cisgendered social norms and privileges. While powerful and greedy forces still work mightily to suppress these conversations from turning into real change, now more than ever there exists a desire among many to break free of hegemonic forces. This desire, coupled with the problematic, yet unifying connection of the global community to social media allows so many more around the world to not only empathize with others less privileged, but to actually act and vote with the well-being of all in mind. The 2020 election is proof that when more are able to participate in the conversation, the more democratic we can actually claim to be as a society.

The election and its aftermath also proved how stubbornly persistent the fear of losing white supremacy is in the minds of many Americans, and as the Confederate flag flew in the Capitol rotunda on January 6, just how entrenched we are in our racist past. And it all got me thinking: if the cultural education of America’s youth is one of the keys to unlocking the path to a more inclusive and just society, then clearly, the current literary canon needs another reexamination.

In my position as a fairly typical white, educated, liberal, well-meaning high school English teacher, I have always strived to enlighten students on matters of racism in the hopes of shaping the future for a better outcome, in theory. I know many colleagues in my field who feel the same way, and as time and progress march on, we seem to be more the norm than the exception to the rule, at least here in the Bay Area. After fifteen years, I have become profoundly aware that the high school English classroom is what American studies professor Udo J. Hebel calls a “site of memory” – a place where shared societal values are reinforced through stories read and written. Until recently, and in many cases still, the English Language Arts curriculum at the high school level is largely populated by white perspectives. Depending on what state you’re in, and what kind of school you work for, the options are more or less restrictive. After the
1960s, “in the wake of the ethnic empowerment movements,” popular literature changed and more marginalized voices were included in the “canon revisions since the 1980s.” (Hebel 50) However, if you look at a typical reading list at any high school in America, the “diverse” voices represented are usually those that have been approved by a school board, and are therefore subject to the approval of a typically white, economically-comfortable body of elected officials who aim to stay locally electable, and therefore, politically-neutral. For example, Frederick Douglass’ autobiography is usually there, one of the most famous slave narratives. Slave narratives, of course, were subject to sanitation of the worst parts of their stories by their white publishers, and often prefaced by a respected white professional of some kind vouching for the veracity of their claims about slavery’s horrors, all in the service of “modesty,” of course. Douglass himself understood all too well the white audience he was catering to, and adjusted his language accordingly. The literature chosen to reflect what a community thinks is important for students to learn is a window into the soul of that community. These works that form our current “canon” are, as Herbert Grabes’ “Cultural Memory and the Literary Canon” explains, “alongside myths and the narratives of legendary history … the most efficient means of ensuring [that a sufficient number of valuable items from the past be held in collective memory]” (312). The lack of fully authentic, empathy-inducing Black narratives featured in the American high school literary canon indicates that dominant American norms do not value, or most likely, operate out of fear of those narratives replacing their own. The few texts of this nature that do break through onto middle and high school reading lists, such as Maya Angelou’s autobiographical *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Morrison novels such as *The Bluest Eye* and, of course, *Beloved* are subjected to constant scrutiny and challenges by “concerned” parents and citizens. Uncomfortable with confronting the truths of the past is more accurate. As a result, most white
American K-12 students are not actually taught to empathize with African Americans at all through the required literature they read in school.

One popular work taught typically in either late middle school or early high school, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the most frequently remembered works of didactic literature from the average American’s language arts education, imploring the reader to “walk in someone else’s shoes,” – a lesson that seems to linger for a lifetime. As a high school English teacher myself, this lesson is why we ask our students to read literature at all: to broaden their perspectives and develop empathy for others with different life circumstances than their own. I, of course, loved Harper Lee’s novel when I first read it in high school. Even before that, my father, also a high school English teacher, had already introduced me to the film, perhaps seeing himself as a bit of an Atticus Finch to my little Scout. Which is actually the point of the problem. Despite Harper Lee’s clear talent with language and storytelling, where *To Kill a Mockingbird* falls short of its anti-racist potential is in the fact that the reader of the story is actually walking in the shoes of Scout, the young white child who narrates the novel, and I always felt like we were supposed to finish the book feeling like something significant was accomplished in the fight against racism. While Scout struggles to understand the plight of falsely accused black man Tom Robinson in 1930s’ Jim Crow Alabama, along with the impressionable, pubescent high school freshman reader following her story, the reader is permitted a safe distance from the truth of Tom’s experience, in which moral victories are supposed to feel like real ones. How would the impact of *To Kill a Mockingbird* on white America have changed if Tom Robinson had told his own story, sparing none of the horrific details of his treatment at the hands of the Alabama “criminal justice system”? We often forget that at the end of the novel, Tom has been found guilty by a white jury of raping a white woman *despite* Atticus’ irrefutably proving his innocence in court,
and he is subsequently shot and killed while desperately attempting to escape from prison, awaiting appeal. Shot seventeen times in the back by a prison guard. What lesson about justice are students supposed to learn from this outcome? Are we supposed to feel good because Atticus fought the good fight and we were rooting for Tom? We’ll get ‘em next time??? The essential need for all among us to understand not just a sanitized, distanced accounting of racism in one little small, Southern town, but the devastating truth and impact of traumatic racist experiences is at the heart of the inspiration for this thesis.

Moreover, the impact of literature about the past on society today is important not just for those who don’t know about historical injustices, but is perhaps most important for those who DO know: those who are the descendants of oppressed peoples, who continue to experience not only bias from the outside toward their community and selves, but who also inherit the shame of abuse and the trauma of oppression; those who have internalized society’s biases and struggle to find the confidence to believe in themselves; or for those who are still routinely victims of the same oppression by virtue of their daily experiences at the hands of the dominant group. These are the daily realities for many young people of color in America. By leaving out large swaths of the population and their perspectives from the traditional literary curriculum, people of marginalized communities are revictimized in a way, losing a connection with the past that comes so naturally to their white peers. How can fictional stories about the trauma of racism help readers of color understand where they came from, understand the pain of their grandparents and parents, or understand why they may have to overcome obstacles their white peers don’t?

Allowing for people of historically oppressed communities to take ownership of the narratives told about them is a constant struggle between the dominant white culture and those cultures who wish to tell stories that may contradict the narratives of the former, in which the
modes of storytelling on a wide scale are owned and sanctioned by the very dominant culture that seeks to maintain its position. Toni Morrison herself played a pivotal role in shifting this dynamic throughout her career, and not just as a writer. Raised in a relatively open-minded, mixed race community in mid-20th century Ohio, she wrote in an essay titled “On Beloved” about her “early years as a student, during which time I was keenly aware of erasures and absences and silences in the written history available to me – silences I took for censure” (280). Morrison eventually came to believe through this “willed, scholarly indifference … that black people signified little or nothing in the imagination of white American writers” or the national discourse, in general (Playing in the Dark 14-5). After attending Howard and Cornell universities, Morrison worked as a professor and book editor early in her career, and noted that she didn’t like the way Black people were inauthentically or superficially depicted in most books, fiction and non. She spent the 1960s doing what she could to promote and advance African American writers in the publishing industry, such as Angela Davis and Toni Cade Bambara, who were writing about Black people in authentic ways, “who were vocal either politically or just writing wonderful fiction” (qtd. in Bates). This socio political push toward breaking with past hegemonic traditions to study the history and perspective of those outside the “norm” of society paved the way for Morrison’s own work, beginning with her first novel, The Bluest Eye, in 1970, about a young Black girl who wishes she had blue eyes like a white girl.

Most significant among the benefits of books like The Bluest Eye is for readers to see their own experiences of injustice mirrored back to them by the protagonists of these stories in a way not seen before in popular literature. It’s a good thing if a piece of fiction can help a blindly privileged person open their mind to an unknown truth about the way the world works. But it’s great when those same stories can also feel like true representations of self to a person whose
identity compares with that of the story’s hero(ine). In Morrison’s adolescence, one thing for
certain in the literature studied in school was that “vulnerable young black girls were profoundly
absent” and when they did appear they were characters to “pity without understanding,” never
the heroine (“On Beloved” 281). The Women’s Movement of the 1970s, the decade preceding
Beloved’s writing and that shaped Morrison as a newly published writer, generated significant
debate over women’s rights to control their bodies, especially around the “requirement” to
become a mother. White women demanded equality, which for many meant the ability to choose
career over children and family, a choice rarely afforded to many working class women of any
color, and one certainly never afforded to enslaved Black women - quite the opposite actually -
enslaved Black women were intentionally stripped of the opportunity to be mothers in any kind
of “traditional” sense. In describing how this missing perspective of the women’s movement
contributed to the genesis of Beloved’s writing, Morrison wrote, “Suppose having children, being
called a mother, was the supreme act of freedom - not its opposite?” (“On Beloved” 282).
Enslaved mothers were not permitted to play the role of mother beyond what it took to produce
children and keep them (barely) alive, only to have them taken away as “property” of her owner.
In Beloved, Morrison presents the trauma of the enslaved mother, and a multitude of other
characters, to “dig deeply into the interior lives of slaves,” offering American readers a
perspective on slavery not considered in popular literature before it.

Thesis Overview

The following two chapters will present close analysis of Beloved, chosen as a text that
exemplifies the power of literature to reflect multiple rhetorical purposes at the same time: to use
literary techniques to accurately portray an aspect of history that is so difficult to talk about to the
point of vehement denial of its lasting impact on today; to use language and structural elements to effectively draw any reader into the traumatic experience of slavery; to offer a path for Black women in particular to healing and restoration; and to showcase the culturally unique talent suppressed by a literary world dominated by white supremacist notions of “art,” both through Morrison’s own clear brilliance, as well as the historically Black modes of storytelling she highlights throughout the novel.

Chapter One, “Scarred and Shattered,” shows how *Beloved* uses both its form and content to emphasize the devastating, multi-layered, lifelong traumas of slavery and their clear, lasting effects on not only its direct victims, but their descendants, entire communities, and ultimately the whole of society. Morrison’s characters exhibit textbook behavior of those suffering post-traumatic stress, which she explained in her essay “On *Beloved*” was central to the work: “the shared effort to avoid imagining slave life as lived from their own point of view became the subtheme, the structure” (283). In the field of psychiatry, Dr. Sandra Bloom’s work on trauma explores how traumatic experiences impact the brain and body as well as the lingering effects of repressed traumatic memories: “the traumatic experience will remain unmetabolized, unintegrated and still present. […] haunting the person as it reappears as nightmares, flashbacks and behavioral re-enactments” (“Bridging the black hole” 206). Bloom explores how stories are the “bridge” over the black hole, or darkness, created by traumatic experience. The characters’ heroic journeys in *Beloved* are primarily to process these memories and their present-day ramifications into a coherent narrative of the past, to be forgiven for that past, and to find genuine happiness and hope for the future. Morrison lights a path for readers and sufferers alike to healing through the use of storytelling techniques and a theme that emphasizes the importance of passing on stories, as the characters unravel parts of their past to each other and Morrison
herself unites the readers’ understanding through seamlessly stitching together various perspectives and stories throughout the novel. In her essay on the theme of community in *Beloved*, critic Dara Byrne theorizes that beyond the benefits of storytelling for individual characters, “the story to ‘pass on’ is the reconnection of the black community,” a goal as important in today’s divided America as it was when African peoples were first ripped away from their families as captives of white slave traders. Chapter Two, “Rememories and Restitchings,” therefore focuses on Morrison’s reminder to readers as not only a storyteller herself but as a guardian of African-American storytelling traditions, that the sharing of our pain with others, by any means necessary, is the only real path to healing.
Chapter 1: Scarred and Shattered

Trauma Theory and Beloved

The title character of Toni Morrison’s acclaimed novel Beloved is the ghost of a dead child looking for her lost mother that haunts formerly enslaved Sethe and her family as they fight to move on with their lives and forget what slavery did to them, or made them do. Individuals like Sethe and the others in her family with unprocessed trauma struggle to lead fulfilling lives as their drive to control their emotions makes them anxious, numb to feelings both positive or negative, and apathetic toward life, often engaging in a variety of isolating behaviors. The defensive effort to avoid the pain of remembering the past is both constant and futile. Despite their determination to suppress, characters are shown to be thinking about the past incessantly, with seemingly no control over their thoughts. Beyond the immediate family, the entire community of formerly enslaved African Americans with their own unprocessed trauma express interpersonal judgment and isolate Sethe’s family as people struggle to understand her point of view while avoiding dealing with their own emotions surrounding what they experienced while enslaved. The end result for Sethe and her family is further isolation, lack of empathy, and at worst, loss of hope for any potential of a happy life in community with others. The ghost called Beloved is not just one woman’s dead child, but a representative of all those children whose lives the evil of American slavery has destroyed in so many insidious ways, even those who never experienced slavery but descend from it, a reality still evident in the 1980s when the novel was published and still wreaking havoc on people’s lives today.

A clear theme of Beloved is that the most difficult stories to tell are the ones that reflect our deepest pain. And without a clear understanding or processing of those stories, individuals and families become stuck in destructive cycles. Similarly, because our contemporary society has
done such an outstanding job of downplaying the truth of slavery within traditional education venues and popular media, many unaffected white people fail to see the past and its effects on today as significant or serious enough to engender empathy, let alone legislation or significant changes in harmful behaviors or policies. One need only look at the difference in the government's response to the “crack epidemic” versus the more recent “opioid crisis.” It’s no accident that the “drug war” diction more closely associated with Black Americans in popular media portrayals is made to sound more like a disease spreading in our country rather than the result of human suffering that must be addressed with compassion, implied by the more sympathetic word “crisis.” Why did the increase in crack cocaine and other drug use within American communities in the 1970s and 80s lead to the increase in aggressive law enforcement tactics in low income communities populated largely by people of color and astronomical numbers of black and brown men and women in prison, yet the opioid problems initiated through the power of “big pharma” are being responded to with billions of dollars in government funds now available for treating the mental health disease of addiction? An April 2020 article published in the *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, presents a significant study measuring Congressional policy responses to the current opioid crisis against similar measures proposed during the 1980s and 1990s and the extent to whether they focus on treatment rather than punishment. The authors of the study concluded, “members of Congress have responded to the opioid crisis by proposing more treatment-oriented policies,” suggesting “the political system is differently sensitive to the suffering of white victims of the opioid crisis” (Jin 202). Alternatively, in the 80s and 90s, America’s elected representatives were not able to empathize with the pain of Black communities who were portrayed in the media as the source of and ground zero for crack addiction, and the resulting policies – such as the infamous 1994 President
Clinton-backed crime bill aimed at curtailing the reign of Black “superpredators” – leaned much more dramatically on punishment. Simply a problem that needed to be eradicated, as opposed to humans that needed help.

_Beloved’s_ timing, published in 1987 at the height of the “crack epidemic,” when it seemed those suffering from addiction were more often the subject of jokes than prayers, came at a fitting time to remind readers to have compassion for what Black people have been through that may have led to their making choices others cannot understand. Rather than judge the end result, Morrison argues, examine the context and every possible perspective. The choices Sethe makes in order to “save” her children are horrifying to the community around her – they refuse to entertain the implications of her actions that an enslaved life is a fate worse even than death. Similarly, today’s policy makers often refuse to see the humanity in those struggling or to recognize the societal forces that contribute to that struggle, and subsequently deny support for legislation that would help. The Biblical epigraph of Toni Morrison’s _Beloved_ reads, “I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved.” Romans 9:25 is a verse reflecting God’s embrace of the outsider and the outcast. In 2022 terms, we might simply say, Black Lives Matter. This fight is about more than civil and political rights; it’s about the struggle for Black people to be seen as fully human and for their problems and their root causes to be considered with the same compassion white communities seem to have for each other.

**The Scars of Slavery**

To first establish the reality behind the facts that we so often gloss over in history books, beginning in the 1500s and breaking with traditional rules around enslavement of captured
populations among conquering states by focusing solely on genetic differences as justification, 

millions of people from Africa were ripped from their homes as captives of the Atlantic slave trade and brought through torturous conditions to what is now America, brutalized and dehumanized incessantly, forced into unending slave labor that supplied their owners and their compatriots with incredible resources and wealth, denied education and dreams of a future for generations, only to have the affected descendents of those original captives eventually “freed” from bondage. However, that freedom came without much in resources, education, or empathy, and a whole lot of continued degradation and violence as the formerly enslaved sought to establish themselves as human once again: find their families, make a living and a home, and build community with others. We cannot ignore the enormous impact this history has had on the present manner in which we think and behave as members of differing racial groups. In order for our society to break free from the past, we must take out these skeletons from the back of the closet, examine them, and learn from them. This education is crucial in the English classroom, and Morrison’s Beloved is a profound example of the kind of literature that has the power to teach about slavery and the trauma of racism in an empathy-inducing way. Set in post-Civil War Ohio, the novel is about the power of storytelling to process a past consumed by great trauma and pain. Sethe’s journey to understand her past in order to move beyond it is enveloped by her family, community, and ultimately Beloved’s journey to do the same. Through the series of stories it tells, the novel is a powerful reopening of the wound of our entire nation’s unprocessed trauma, the excruciating healing of which continues today. Beloved exposes, one character after another, the clear traumatic effects of slavery on each individual touched by it, and likewise, how the individual and communal repression of historical trauma increases its long term effects on its victims’ abilities to lead fulfilling lives.
The system of chattel slavery and the mechanisms used by those in power to maintain it in the United States was a source of daily terror and trauma for those subjected to it. Slavery, of course, is not just a single traumatic experience that happens to a person one day, but consists of a lifetime of daily violations on a person’s body and spirit, small and large, that accumulate to devastating effects on the psyche of those enslaved. Peter Loewenberg, a political psychologist and expert on generational trauma defines trauma as “a violent shock … a sudden loss of control over external and internal reality, with consequences that affect the whole organism.” As a psychiatric concept, Sigmund Freud is most influential in transforming the idea of trauma from its Greek root meaning “wound,” as in a physical problem, to the “[mental] damage perpetrated on the mind, identity, feelings, and self” (Loewenberg 55-6). Traumatic events happen externally and often very quickly; however, their internal effects have the power to permanently alter a person, resulting in unhealthy patterns of behavior – all deriving from the strong need to manage the overwhelming emotions associated with that trauma. For those who have experienced repeated, prolonged trauma, the cumulative effects can leave victims permanently anxious, consumed with painful memories and intrusive thoughts, and above all, steeling oneself constantly against the possibility of further harm. According to Sandra L. Bloom, M.D., an early pioneer in the field of trauma theory and current professor at the School of Public Health at Drexel University, in an overview of her work titled “Trauma Theory Abbreviated,” for the victims of trauma, “Each episode of danger connects to every other episode of danger in our minds, so that the more danger we are exposed to, the more sensitive we are to danger” (2). As a result of the drive to shut down their emotions and avoid pain, living a happy, fulfilling life becomes next to impossible, and at times stressful triggers can lead to shocking choices. Bloom writes, “When stressed, we cannot think clearly, we cannot consider the long-range
consequences of our behavior, we cannot weigh all of the possible options before making a decision” (5). In *Beloved*, Morrison imagines “what if” a formerly enslaved woman is so traumatized by the lifetime of accumulated violations that have happened to her that it becomes logical to kill her children rather than envision them subjected to the same torture? The series of traumas the novel exposes reveal that slavery was a system that influenced countless unthinkable choices in its victims, proving that trauma’s influence in decision making is profound and showing what people are willing to do to free themselves from it.

Even before we know the whole story, the reader can see the clear lingering physical effects of formerly enslaved characters’ traumatic pasts, in the physical presence of scars and physical demise of people. Formerly enslaved characters in the novel suffer lasting physical ailments they would not otherwise have were it not for their pasts. For the novel’s hero Sethe, after her harrowing escape from the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky and arrival at Baby Suggs’s house at 124 Bluestone Road in Ohio, the “chokecherry tree” of a scar on her back is the lasting physical manifestation of a traumatic whipping she suffered while enslaved (16). This floral comparison breathes life into the past; though the scar is literally and figuratively behind Sethe, it lives on. Similarly, the male protagonist Paul D describes the way his hands tremble uncontrollably at times, though he strives to maintain his composure in the public sphere, a mask he wears to avoid showing weakness. However, as soon as he finds himself alone, “It felt like rippling – gentle at first and then wild. […] Nothing could stop them or get their attention” (107). Though his ingrained stoicism in the face of his oppressor remains strong, the internal struggle he fights so hard to suppress is given away by the lack of control he has over his hands. Further, the novel’s matriarchal figure Baby Suggs shares minimal details of her past with the reader in her flashbacks, yet we are aware early on of a painful limp from a broken hip of unknown, but
surely slavery-related, origin. Similar to Paul D, Baby Suggs hides her physical pain from those around her as much as she can, but “her hip hurt every single day. […] to get in and out of bed she had to lift her thigh with both hands” (140). These physical scars have blended into the background of the characters’ lives like old furniture. They are not acknowledged, nor is the source of these wounds ever discussed at any length, if at all. Beyond the physical damage, the complete absence of characters who should otherwise be present or alive, like Sethe’s sons and husband, and of course her “beloved” infant daughter, further reflects the tangible devastation caused by slavery.

Like the slow unraveling of a tightly woven sweater, the source of the characters’ scars are revealed through a series of intricately connected yet distinct flashbacks, some as brief as a single word or phrase, while others describe in great detail the events that lead up to the child’s death, mirroring the fragmented manner in which traumatic memories are imprinted on the brain. The reader learns early in the novel that Sethe, her husband Halle, Paul D, and the others enslaved at Sweet Home lived a somewhat more “humane” existence under their first owner, Mr. Garner. However, upon his death, “schoolteacher,” Mr. Garner’s brother-in-law, “arrived to put things in order.” In other words, he planned to return his newly acquired “property” back to the animalistic existence he believes is their fate. His violent physical and psychological abuse, according to Paul D’s recollection, “punched the glittering iron out of Sethe’s eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight” (9). In Paul D’s telling, Sethe was a spirited young woman on Sweet Home and the object of desire of all the enslaved men. Sethe’s sense of humanity was permitted to develop beyond that of a typical enslaved woman when Sethe and Halle were permitted by the Garners to “marry” and have three children, two sons and an infant daughter, before schoolteacher arrived. After experiencing his tormenting ways and learning her
family was bound to be sold and separated, Sethe agrees to join the others in attempting to
escape North together, despite being pregnant with her fourth child. The failed escape attempt
leads to Sethe’s capture and torture, assaulted by schoolteacher and his nephews in the barn, the
young white men callously drinking her mother’s milk directly from her breasts. Sethe’s
torturous experience leads to her decision to make another perilous escape on the Underground
Railroad all on her own, this one successful, and during which her fourth child Denver is born.
Eventually reaching freedom at Halle’s mother Baby Suggs’ home in Ohio, she enjoys a blissful
month reunited with all of her children until schoolteacher and his henchmen, using the rights
granted them under the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, arrive looking to take Sethe and all of her
children back to Kentucky and a life of slavery. His sudden appearance triggers a PTSD-like
panic in Sethe, leading her to attempt to kill all of her children rather than see them grow up
enslaved. She succeeds in killing only her “crawlingalready girl,” name unknown except by the
eventual engraving on her tombstone, seven letters “bought” by Sethe from the graveyard man
with her own body in one last act of degradation: Beloved.

Sethe’s slicing of her infant daughter’s throat to prevent her being captured and sent back
to Kentucky is portrayed as the culmination of the series of traumatic events that not only
devastates Sethe’s family but the entire community so recently acquainted with the joys of
freedom, reminded by the baby’s death of the painful realities under which they live. The
infanticide at the center of this onion of storytelling is what critic Andrew Levy calls, an
“unspeakable” act that “demands explanation.” After Sethe is discovered “wild-eyed” in the
woodshed with her infant daughter’s throat slit, head loose, bleeding out in her arms, one of her
attempted captors and former abuser says, “What she go and do that for? On account of a
beating?” (150). It’s no surprise that the enslaver can’t understand the humanity of the woman he
was taught to objectify and study like an animal by his “schoolteacher” uncle. But Morrison also shows how the free Black community in Ohio is equally horrified by Sethe’s actions and ultimately isolate Sethe and her surviving children, not because they don’t understand why Sethe did what she did, but having been enslaved themselves, they know all too well why she did it. They shun her rather than face their own painful memories and offer understanding. Freud theorized on defense mechanisms people employ in the effort to maintain and protect their carefully constructed conception of self. One such defense mechanism, projection, occurs when someone essentially denigrates another person to avoid recognizing the same esteem-damaging trait within themselves (Baumeister 1090). Applying projection theory to Beloved, free Blacks in Sethe’s community ostracize Sethe and see her as a monster, rather than acknowledge the same potential within themselves if so triggered by their own past trauma, which they fight to ignore.

And in turn, in her own defensive reaction, rather than seek out support and community, Sethe isolates and attempts to repress the past from her mind. To those in the community who judge her, Sethe pridefully defies expectations to explain herself: “She could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn’t get it right off – she could never explain” (163). She refuses to engage with the community’s questions, and so embodies the cold, unfeeling image others have of her for decades. Eventually, her future happiness comes to depend on her making Paul D understand her choices in the novel’s present 1880s setting. Paul D, her long time friend from Sweet Home and now lover and potential life partner almost twenty years later, experienced all the horrors of slavery in his own way, but like the others, he struggles to accept why Sethe made the choice she did. Through the process of uncovering her past, Sethe comes to an uneasy peace that “what she had done was right because it came from true love,” the love of a mother driven to protect her children at all cost (251). Sethe angrily thinks about Paul
D’s reaction to learning the truth of the infanticide late in the novel, speaking to the ghost she thinks is her daughter reincarnated:

   Too thick, he said. My love was too thick. What he know about it? Who in the world is he willing to die for? Would he give his privates to a stranger in return for a carving? Some other way, he said. There must have been some other way. Let schoolteacher haul us away, I guess, to measure your behind before he tore it up? I have felt what it felt like and nobody walking or stretched out is going to make you feel it too. (203)

Though Sethe is privately justifying her choice, she simultaneously can’t or won’t verbalize it, leaving her disconnected from the equally closed off Paul D, who shoves aside his own past trauma and shame. This cycle repeats until she and Paul D split and the entire community is just as divided as their former owners intended. The intentional destruction of family life on many levels within the slavery system spills over into free life, as well. Through Sethe’s interior monologues, Morrison takes advantage of the novel’s capacity for exploring a character’s interior thoughts, helping the reader understand the tragic irony at work in the disconnection between Sethe and her community.

   **Shattered Lives, Families, and Communities**

   To begin to understand the trauma of enslaved family life, Black women not only bore the long-term effects of physical labor, but also endured the pain of *maternal* labor and eventual trauma in their roles as mothers to children they stood little chance of raising themselves under the system of slavery in America. In the antebellum South, the relationships of enslaved men and women merely served the purpose of procreation in the minds of the white enslavers, and as much as possible, familial connections were severed to prevent slaves from having any loyalty
but to their masters. Most often, infants were only permitted to stay with their mothers long enough to wean, if at all, before being taken away to be raised by an older woman who could no longer do any other kind of work. Eventually, they would then be sold to another owner when they were old enough to command a decent price for their potential abilities in slave labor. On the Sweet Home plantation depicted in *Beloved*, the enslaved are not shown to have family connections prior to arriving there. Remembering her life before she was sold to Sweet Home, Baby Suggs recalls, “men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized” (23). As a result of the callous machinations of the enslavers, Black families were often torn apart, and this disconnection from family allowed the oppressors to exercise greater control over their “property.” English Professor Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber wrote an essay on the recurring topic of group trauma in Morrison’s novels, appearing in the collection of essays *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. She writes of the traumatic experience of family separation and the long term trauma it causes people who “lack a connection with their mothers or fathers because parenting children in a nurturing family structure is in most cases impossible. […] the lack of parental attachment increases trauma and anxiety” (34-5). In other words, a lasting fear of connection from very early on in life forms out of these constant forced separations for many enslaved people. The long term effects of this persistent trauma are seen in Baby Suggs’ apathetic reaction to her son Halle’s birth, having lost seven children previously to the “business” of slavery, “because it wasn’t worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway” (139). By some sort of luck, Halle grows up with his mother, and her lifelong struggle is rewarded when he buys his mother’s freedom from Mr. Garner through excessive amounts of “overtime.” Through
her own child’s act of love and sacrifice for Baby Suggs, this “victory” of family ironically forces her to move far away from her son, whom she will subsequently never see again.

Another factor affecting enslaved mothers' ability to love their children from an emotional sense is the frequent trauma inflicted in the conception of their children: many white male enslavers saw it as part of their rights and even their “duty” to assert dominance and bolster ego through rape, and of course, impregnate enslaved women in order to produce more slaves. Consent had little to do with the conception of these children. In many cases, enslaved women resisted their enslavement through refusal to participate in this system via various birth control and abortion tactics such as consuming certain herbs, and the manipulation of pregnancy claims, exercising the only power they had left: to deny the enslaver one more life to own (Chakrabarti 155). In one of the novel’s flashbacks, Sethe recalls that her mother was raped aboard the ship from Africa to the United States, and many times by white male captors thereafter. Sethe’s “Nan,” the older woman who cares for her, tells young Sethe that her mother “threw away” all the babies she had from those white men. However, she kept Sethe because she was the product of her mother’s affair with another black man, one she “put her arms around,” indicating a consenting relationship (62). As a grown woman remembering this, Sethe is angered to realize that her mother must have loved her as much as she loved her own children, and yet she was permitted to have no relationship with her. Sethe’s mother was separated from her by the hard labor of slavery, and eventually a death by execution, probably for attempting to escape, yet another generational pattern on display in the novel: a lost daughter is left wondering why her own mother would abandon her.

Sethe’s complicated relationship to motherhood as a result of slavery is a central component of understanding her mental state in the days leading up to and following the
infanticide. Sethe’s psyche is complicated by the unusual circumstances of her family life with Halle on Sweet Home, as Baby Suggs’ points out she had “the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that ‘somebody’ son who had fathered every one of her children” (23). By the time she is inflicted with the most gruesome physical and psychological violence of slavery by schoolteacher, her trauma is magnified by the deep love and protective drive she has developed as a mother to her children. Throughout the novel, she verbalizes frequently about the loss of her milk for her children as a result of the schoolteacher and his nephews’ actions in the barn. A 2003 article titled “Breastfeeding, Bonding, and the Mother-Infant Relationship,” published in a journal of developmental psychology, suggests that psychologically, breastfeeding “may be neither necessary nor sufficient to foster the development” of a tightly bonded mother-infant relationship (Else-Quest 496). However, in Beloved breastmilk serves as a symbol of the love Sethe has for her children: it is nurturing and protective in delivering essential vitamins, minerals, and immune-system boosting antibodies for the infant, and nourishment and protection of her children are Sethe’s driving motivations. Physiologically speaking, it is in the early postpartum period “when maternal oxytocin circulation is at its peak, and some research has shown...women are predisposed to form bonds and affiliative behavior” at this time (Else-Quest 497). Sethe had just given birth to her fourth child Denver while still breastfeeding her toddler-aged daughter in the month leading up to her third child’s death. It’s a fair assessment to assume her maternal hormone levels were at a high level during the time in which she was making many crucial, life or death decisions. When a very pregnant Sethe is forced to send her three children north without her, choosing to stay behind and find the others during the failed escape attempt from Sweet Home, Sethe “felt like I was split in two” by the pain of being separated from her children (202). Again, nursing them is the vehicle by which she most strongly
conveys her authentic motherly claim to her children. Her biggest fear, and source of pain, while away from them is worrying not just that her nursing toddler will suffer malnutrition being away from her, but that she will become emotionally separated from her as well, losing the bond she holds most precious: “Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. […] nobody had her milk but me” (16). Of all the physical pain and sexual trauma visited upon Sethe by schoolteacher and his nephews, the lasting impression in Sethe’s mind, emphasized by her every time the event comes up, is that “those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it,” robbing her of her ability to be a mother, a devastating stripping of her humanity (16). This trauma-induced loss of humanity dominoes into the post-traumatic stress Sethe experiences that causes her to panic and kill Beloved. The interruption to the natural maternal process caused by schoolteacher and his nephews ultimately dooms Sethe and her children from maintaining a healthy connection.

Sethe’s husband Halle, Paul D, and even old Stamp Paid, depict the devastating effects of this family trauma for the psyche of the male counterparts of women like Sethe and Baby Suggs. Slavery’s traumas have the potential to leave its male victims mentally and emotionally broken, disconnected from others, and afraid to trust as a result of the plethora of emasculating experiences endured while enslaved. In the aftermath of the same failed escape attempt in which Sethe is assaulted, the other enslaved men of Sweet Home are also captured, tortured, and one even killed. Sethe’s husband Halle, evading capture in the barn, witnesses Sethe’s sexual assault and disappears, last seen by Paul D with butter smeared all over his face, indicating he’d lost his mind after what he’d seen. Eighteen years later, after learning the truth from Sethe of what Halle witnessed in the barn, Paul D understands inherently that witnessing his wife’s sexual trauma at
the hands of schoolteacher is what caused Halle to snap and disappear. Halle, the married father of four who had worked to buy his mother’s freedom, filled with the masculine pride of a “Sweet Home man,” was forced to helplessly watch the torture of the woman he loved. Paul D recalls, “All I knew was that something broke him. […] whatever he saw go on in that barn that day broke him like a twig” (68). What broke Halle was the realization and acceptance of his utter powerlessness in the face of the white enslaver. No matter how hard he works or whatever “privileges” his owner might bestow upon him, just like that, “whitepeople” can strip them away.

Sethe reacts at first with anger and humiliation at learning from Paul D that Halle was there and didn’t do anything to protect her or avenge her attackers. But, Paul interrupts her, “Hey! Hey! Listen up. Let me tell you something. A man ain’t a goddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can’t chop down because they’re inside” (69). Here, Paul verbalizes the result of constant dehumanization and inability to fulfill what are probably many natural male impulses, as enslaved men developed a complex of inner turmoil they were forced to suppress in order to survive.

The disconnection of men from their feelings depicted in the novel is the desired result of the white enslavers, and future segregators; to ensure the enslaved would stay docile, they found torturous ways to emasculate the Black men they owned. Nowhere is this more evident in the novel than during Paul D’s imprisonment on the chain gang after the attempted escape from Sweet Home. Chain gangs like the one Paul D is imprisoned on were part of the earliest version of today’s criminal justice system, which Morrison described in the 1980s amidst the misguided “war on drugs” as one of the “persistently slippery forms of modern racism in which the slavebody is reconstructed and reenters the blackbody as an American form of ethnic cleansing” (“The Slavebody and the Blackbody” 77). Using a loophole in the emancipatory 13th
Amendment that allows for slavery if an individual is in prison presumably for criminal behavior, chain gangs forced Black prisoners to complete backbreaking, unpaid labor as part of their sentence for whatever crime they may (or may not) have committed. Paul D’s experience on the chain gang every morning involved the prisoners being commanded to kneel in chains in front of the guards while they would force them to perform oral sex, calling the offering of their penises to their prisoners’ mouths “breakfast.” To add to the degradation, the men were required to continue their compliant replies of “Yes, sir,” to indicate they were happy to accept this sexual assault. Refusal or resistance was punishable by death. Upon first witnessing this routine on his first morning on the chain gang, “convinced he was next, Paul D retched – vomiting up nothing at all” (108). The physical reaction confirms the clear trauma of this unexpected torture amidst an already torturous experience. He is reacting in part to the emasculation, similar to Sethe’s amplified reaction to being stripped of her maternal power, and like Sethe, his reaction is also amplified by the fact that Mr. Garner had permitted the enslaved males at Sweet Home to feel more empowered than was typical (125). After schoolteacher destroys these illusions, Paul D realizes the Sweet Home rooster experiences more freedom in his masculinity than the male slaves: “Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was. […] I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub” (72). Following Paul D’s capture by schoolteacher, degrading punishment, and chain gang experience, the image of Mister the proud Sweet Home rooster casually sitting on the edge of the water tub while Paul is carried away in chains with a bit in his mouth becomes symbolic of slavery’s dehumanization of the men subjected to it.

The Paul D we meet in the novel’s present day, eighteen years after leaving Sweet Home and the last time he saw Sethe, is described as “a man with an immobile face” but with a special
ability to empathize with others’ feelings, emphasizing the outward mask of stoicism he is portraying (7-8). Upon arriving at Sethe’s Ohio home in 1873 and witnessing the close connection between her and Denver, Paul D thinks it’s “very risky” for Sethe to love Denver as much as she does. Based on his experiences with loss of community and lack of family, “The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit” (45). Paul D is successful in his mind at holding back the past until he arrives at Sethe’s house and begins confrontation with his own memories, which he had tightly tucked away in his “tobacco tin” and avoided dealing with by not letting himself get emotionally attached to anything or anyone. When he learns that Halle and Sethe’s two sons have run off, he thinks, “Probably best, he thought. If a Negro got legs he ought to use them. Sit down too long, somebody will figure out a way to tie them up” (10). The fear of being tied down, literally or figuratively, clearly stems from the traumatic past. Thinking about whether or not to stay with Sethe after their reunion and her invitation to stay, he recalls the traps of his past, including the chain gang, “where he slept underground and crawled into sunlight for the sole purpose of breaking rock” so that now, “walking off when he got ready was the only way he could convince himself that he would no longer have to sleep, pee, eat or swing a sledge hammer in chains” (40). After the innumerable violations he experienced at the hands of white captors, the ability to move about the world with absolute freedom has become a precious value. Paul D displays clear post-traumatic behavior of a formerly enslaved man, his isolation a last defense against the emasculating effects of white supremacy.

Sethe and Paul D exhibit similar defense mechanisms toward each other in an effort to avoid reliving their traumatic pasts, perhaps trying to will the past to not have any effect on the present, and as a result, they struggle to find harmony together. On the effects of trauma on
interpersonal relationships, Sandra Bloom writes, “It is certainly clear that emotional numbing is damaging to relationships. We need all of our emotions available to us if we are to create and sustain healthy relationships with other people. […] We may withdraw from relationships that could trigger off memories” (“Trauma Theory” 9). In Sethe, Paul D recognizes the same steely nature he exhibits himself and understands why. He describes her “iron eyes and backbone to match … like two wells into which he had trouble gazing. Even punched out they need to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held” (9). Sethe’s trauma conveyed through a facial expression alone is triggering to Paul D. Later, after opening up about the painful memory of being hauled off in chains in front of Mister the rooster, Paul D tries to shut down any further trips down memory lane with Sethe: “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. He would not pry it loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him” (72-3). Likewise, Sethe reveals enough to Paul D but only up to the point of her biggest shame: the killing of her baby. She tries to reassure herself that telling him the whole story isn’t necessary for them to have a successful relationship. She thinks, “The things neither knew about the other— the things neither had word-shapes for— well, it would come in time: where they led him off to sucking iron; the perfect death of her crawling-already? baby” (99). Though it seems an important turning point that they can open up to each other somewhat, Sethe and Paul D’s full harmony will continue to be delayed, and the ghost will continue to wreak havoc on their relationship, until the most painful parts are in the open. The cycle continues, in and outside of the home, not to mention in the real world outside of the novel, as well.
These emotional numbing behaviors probably made a lot of practical sense and seemed most necessary in order for formerly enslaved men and women to cope with a brutal post-slavery life. Post-Civil War America offered little relief from the dehumanization and disconnection bred through slavery. Freedom offered little in the way of, well, freedom. In an analysis of Beloved titled “‘Yonder they do not love your flesh.’ Community in Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” Dara Byrne emphasizes, “Even after the Civil War, the Reconstruction period of 1865-1877 further normalized black subordination, making it difficult for freed slaves to escape the grasp of white rule” (29). Economics aside, culturally speaking, pervasive racism normalized continued violence as a means of oppression against blacks. These literal trappings of “free” life for African-Americans dictate a plethora of mental trappings as well, as “freed slaves carry the generational memory of abuse, and their post-slavery reality reactivates the prior bodily experience and threat of real bodily harm” (Schreiber 36). Newly freed African Americans never had the opportunity to recover from the trauma of their enslaved lives before being thrown into yet another state of constant vigilance and terror. Isolated from white society and isolated in many ways from each other, Paul D recollects the post-Civil War condition of many Black Americans searching for a welcoming community of family or friends, a place to belong:

Forbidden public transportation, chased by debt and filthy ‘talking sheets,’ they followed secondary routes, scanned the horizon for signs and counted heavily on each other. Silent, except for social courtesies, when they met one another they neither described nor asked about the sorrow that drove them from one place to another. (52-3)

Morrison uses Paul D’s years of traveling to bring a broader perspective of the post-Civil War Black experience to the small community where Sethe lives in Ohio and the vast numbers of formerly enslaved people struggling to make sense of their pasts. Paul D reveals having seen
early signs of the severe mental health effects of trauma, which left untreated lead their sufferers to varying degrees of insanity. He tells of having met a teenage boy, “a Negro about fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said he couldn’t remember living anywhere else.” In another encounter with this tragic loss of sanity, he saw a Black woman executed “for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies” (66). Apparently, the loss of the ducks was deemed more significant to society than the loss of this woman’s humanity, or understanding what past experiences triggered this hallucination. Morrison, considering the unique qualities of the American slave society and its aftermath for its victims and their descendents, speaking to a group of young African American artists, “The dishonor associated with having been enslaved does not inevitably doom one’s heirs to vilification, demonization, or crucifixion. What sustains these latter is racism” (“The Slavebody and the Blackbody” 76). Immediately after Sethe’s arrest for the infanticide, and the whole chaotic scene, two white children show up asking if Baby Suggs can fix a pair of shoes for their mother by Wednesday, impatiently asking until she responds, though she is deep in shock over what has just transpired (153). This little moment shows the second-class citizen reality in which the characters live in this post-slavery society. A reality in which their trauma is magnified by the white world’s complete obliviousness to it.

In yet another layer of psychological warfare free Blacks are confronted with, Beloved depicts a Black community which contributes to the propagation of the traumatic effects of slavery, acting out their own fears and anxieties on each other in the absence of power against the oppressive forces in society. The inter-community conflicts are on display when Sethe first arrives in Ohio via the Underground Railroad and reunites with her children. Despite suffering the same traumas, instead of finding understanding and love through the sharing of stories, the community displays a sort of “crabs in a barrel” dynamic, expressing jealousy of Baby Suggs,
who appears to be getting ahead of them with her nice house and almost complete family, free from bondage. The happiness of the occasion inspires Stamp Paid to make a painful expedition for two buckets of blackberries that the ladies make into pies which kicks off a party: “Ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry. [...] Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things?” (136-7). Though the community could be happy and hopeful to see the stability and success of a family like Sethe’s, they display jealousy instead. The following morning, the community, spent from the night’s revelry and with this bitter taste in their mouths, fails to warn the family about the arrival of schoolteacher and his nephews on the hunt for the fugitive Sethe and her children. The community “Greek chorus” in this tragedy is represented by Stamp Paid who conveys these resentful feelings to the reader in his reminiscence. Stamp Paid, who witnessed the entire thing from the blackberries to the infanticide, says, “some other thing – like, well, like meanness – that let them stand aside” (157). The meanness perhaps stems subconsciously from their jealousy of Baby Suggs, of whom they thought of as “an ex-slave who had probably never carried one hundred pounds to the scale, or picked okra with a baby on her back” (137). And it is the resulting killing of Sethe’s child that “ruptures [Sethe’s] ties with her new community, which abandons her” (Schreiber 42). Unable, or unwilling, to see the connection of their actions to Sethe’s panicked, triggered attempted killing of her children, or to empathize with the pain within Sethe that led to such an act, the community henceforth engages in an ultimate act of repression of their own trauma: abandoning Sethe and her children altogether.

Explaining the dynamics contributing to the mixed signals and increased negative judgment amongst the community members in Beloved, Bloom writes that without the words to share clearly with others what is happening to us, our behavior becomes the vehicle through
which we send our distress signals to others. However, “Unfortunately, we have largely lost the
capacity for nonverbal interpretation, and so most of these ‘cries for help’ fall on deaf ears.
Instead, we judge, condemn, exclude and alienate the person who is behaving in an asocial,
self-destructive, or antisocial way without hearing the meaning of the message” (“Trauma
Theory” 13). For the most part, the community around Sethe engages in repression of her and her
daughter Denver, repression being defined as “the bottling of threatening material out of the
conscious mind” (Baumeister 1084). The knowledge of the baby’s death is the threatening
material that reminds the others of their pasts. Late in the novel, separated from Sethe as a result
of their aforementioned poor interpersonal communication, Paul D is sleeping in the freezing
cold church and Stamp Paid can’t believe nobody has offered the kindness to have him stay in
their house. Ella, a formerly enslaved woman who represents the community’s female foil to
Sethe, insists Paul D has to be the one to ask, and then he’d be welcome, almost as though the
community intends to ignore Sethe, Paul D, and anything having to do with them as long as
possible. In other instances where ignorance is impossible, “reaction formation,” another defense
mechanism, is on display, in which “people respond to the implication that they have some
unacceptable trait [such as the capacity to snap when so triggered in the way Sethe did] by
behaving in a way that would show them to have the opposite trait” (Baumeister 1085). After the
baby’s death, a large crowd gathers outside Sethe’s house to watch her be arrested and taken
away, and as she walks past them they wonder, “Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little
too straight? Probably” (152). In front of this crowd that knows what she just did, Sethe could be
walking upright to reinstate some level of dignity in their eyes, despite her barbaric actions. Yet,
the community misinterprets this behavior as too full of pride. Years later, after Baby Suggs’
death, the community is torn between paying their respects to the family matriarch and their
repression of Sethe. In turn, Sethe’s pride leads her to respond to their rebuff with her own act of spite. The back and forth escalates over whose food gets eaten at the reception, “So Baby Suggs, holy, having devoted her freed life to harmony, was buried amid a regular dance of pride, fear, condemnation and spite” (171). In a sense, the community’s abandonment of Baby Suggs, Sethe, and her family is the most glaring, and perhaps most futile, attempt to repress the horrors of slavery, embodied by the continued “haunting” of the house as long as the community continues its exile of the woman they want to pretend is just a monster and not at all like them. As the years go on without addressing the elephant in the town, so to speak, communal repression of the traumatic past contributes to a toxic dynamic in which healing seems impossible for all involved.

Depression and apathy toward life as a result of seemingly endless pain and struggle reflect some of the most damaging long term mental effects of unprocessed traumatic experiences, and Morrison illustrates how devastating this mentality can be through many of the characters’ behavior. Early in the novel, Morrison establishes a relationship between colors and emotions. Sethe’s trauma means that she can’t “see” colors, or can’t be impressed by nature’s beauty, in general: “Every dawn she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked its color … it was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it” (39). Her baby’s death and burial represent the last strong emotions Sethe truly allowed herself to feel. She now lives her days in a state of numbness trying to avoid her emotions altogether. In another illustration of this loss of mental will, Paul D describes the men working on the chain gang thinking about the hopelessness of their lives as they hammered away at their work. With every hit, “they killed the flirt whom folks called Life for leading them on. Making them think the next sunrise would be worth it; that another stroke of time would do it at last. Only when she was dead would they be safe.” Paul D goes on to say it took “eighty-six
days and done” on the chain gang before “Life” was dead to him (109). Ironically, Paul D refers to Life’s deceptions and stolen hope as feminine actions, “flirting” with men’s hearts only to break them through endless toil and violence. It’s no wonder he subsequently struggles to feel anything at all, especially love for a woman. Bloom writes, “if a person is subjected to a sufficient number of experiences teaching him or her that nothing they do will affect the outcome, people give up trying” (“Trauma Theory” 3). Ultimately, the tragedy of the baby’s death resulted in the fracture of the community Baby Suggs had so lovingly and hopefully built after becoming free, rupturing “her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart” (89). Stamp Paid reflects on Baby Suggs’ untimely and sad death, attributable to no other cause than her own broken heart: “to belong to a community of other free Negros – to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed – and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance – well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy” (177). The community Baby Suggs had created around her home was destroyed the moment schoolteacher and his nephews “came in my yard,” a point she emphasizes to Stamp Paid when he implores her to once again host her powerful healing ceremonies in the nearby woods, in which Baby Suggs was known to preach self-love and healing to the community (179). The trauma of the baby’s death broke Baby Suggs despite all she had been through, despite her best efforts to remain a beacon of positivity to her post-slavery community. As she lies on her deathbed, Baby Suggs says, “Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed, and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks” (89). Baby Suggs’ demise is similar to the loss of Halle in some ways, giving up on life under the power of whitepeople and the system of enslavement employed to destroy Black people’s lives
no matter how much they may strive and work toward happiness – what Frederick Douglass described in his autobiography as “a hand more unrelenting than death.”

**The Futility of Repression**

*Beloved* illustrates how the natural human response in the face of such overwhelming trauma and pain is to suppress, to try to go about living one’s life as painlessly as possible, without ruminating about the past. As Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber writes, "By repressing or dissociating herself from her trauma, Sethe combats the anxiety that results in her vulnerability, her lack of protection against a feeling of helplessness in the larger, white community" (37). But, following the arrival of both Paul D and the subsequent appearance of the ghostly Beloved, Sethe begins to reexamine her memories of the past, and she turns to her job as a cook as a distraction, thinking, “Working dough. Working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past” (73). Of course, Sethe’s focused effort to avoid thinking about the past is futile, though she attempts to dissociate herself from the part of her that experienced trauma. She thinks of her “rebellious” brain as a separate entity from the rest of her: “Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept?” (70). Though her brain may wander into the past without warning, Sethe can control what she shares with others, exposing her pain, and in her mind, making her more vulnerable to continued suffering. The only arena in which Sethe is able to exert total control is in mothering Denver, and she is determined to protect Denver from the same pain she experienced. Though Denver naturally seeks out stories of the past to help her understand her mother better, Sethe refuses to share out of fear that Denver, like everyone else, “won’t understand, baby” (35). Because Sethe won’t share her experiences of slavery with Denver, she is left with little
understanding of the history that affects her life, yet suffers from it nonetheless. Early in the novel, Denver’s inquiries for more stories about the past inspire Sethe to tell her, “Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over – over and done with – it’s going to always be there waiting for you” (36). Sethe herself was once in Denver’s place, trying to understand her own mother at a very young age in one of their only encounters left to her memory: “she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin” (61). The branding is a clear indicator that Sethe’s mom has her own traumatic past, a point driven home by the fact she says everyone else with the mark is now dead. Young Sethe can only think to respond, “But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too. Mark the mark on me too.” Sethe’s mother then slaps her in the face, a seeming parallel to Sethe’s own admonitions to Denver to leave the past alone. Without adequate resources and financial support, without love and community, and no outlet to express the pain of the past, Sethe and Denver’s relationship again highlights a clear generational cycle of mothers possibly causing more harm than good in their attempt to protect their progeny from the same pain by repressing the stories they could be telling.

In her work on Beloved, Schreiber writes about Denver’s experience as a second generation trauma sufferer. Though she was born and raised a free person, she grows up under a cloud: “trauma pervades Denver's being: her traumatic birth during Sethe's escape; the traumatic return of schoolteacher and her sister's murder” (48). After the dust settles following the infanticide, Denver’s older brothers, who also survived their mother’s trying to kill them, eventually leave and are never heard from again. Baby Suggs’ death is the culmination of what Denver thinks of as “all that leaving: first her brothers, then her grandmother– serious losses since there were no children willing to circle her in a game or hang by their knees from her porch
railing” (12). Without other family, friends or community, Denver and Sethe are alone except for the ghostly presence they both understand to be the dead baby. By the time Paul D arrives at 124 Bluestone, “now Denver was lonely.” Denver clings to her mother, the ghost, and a rich internal fantasy life as the only company she can count on, “which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out” (28-9). We find her at the beginning of the novel’s present day plot in clear mental anguish. When Paul D begins to disrupt her established world, she fears she will lose even what little comfort and companionship she has. In classic angst-ridden teenager form, Denver explodes at Paul D and Sethe over breakfast: “I can’t live here. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I can’t live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don’t like me. Girls don’t either” (14). Denver’s happiness is intricately tied to that of her mother, and Denver’s choices are inevitably shaped by her mother’s traumas, even though she herself didn’t consciously live them. Denver reveals the manifestation of African American literacies scholar and artist Elaine B. Richardson’s assertion that through the languages of our mother tongue literacy, “various nuances and ideas are descended in those languages that reflect a past and help to shape the future of the language users” (677). Ilany Kogan, another scholar of second generation trauma as a result of the Holocaust, offers the psychological term “primitive identification” to describe Sethe and Denver’s dynamic in an essay titled “The second generation in the shadow of terror.” Primitive identification refers to the child’s unconscious assimilation of the parent’s projections, which leads to “a loss of the child’s separate sense of self and to an inability to differentiate between the self and the damaged parent” (Kogan 7). Because Sethe fears the outside world of white people and the damage they can do, Denver learns to internalize these fears, as well. Late in the novel, we learn that deep within Denver’s psyche is an extended fear that whatever caused her mother to kill her sister will come back again: “I spent all of my
outside self loving Ma’am so she wouldn’t kill me” (207). Denver has never known the realities of slavery, and yet, born literally in between her mother’s time in captivity and freedom, she lives a life in limbo, clearly trapped and fearful of her mother’s past.

As a result of reliving their parents' traumas through parental anxiety as well as societal forces that perpetuate those conditions, second generation trauma survivors commonly experience anxiety, unreasonable fears, chronic depression, and feelings of isolation as they grow up. In her elementary years, Denver secretly attended school without her mother’s knowledge, a bright pupil eager for learning, according to her teacher. She thoroughly enjoys school, oblivious that some of her peers were avoiding her, no doubt influenced by their own parents’ opinions of her mother. One day, a boy in her class casually asks, “Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?” (105), turning Denver inward into several months of temporary deafness and further isolation, dashing her motivation to stay at school, and in her words, “put chalk, the little i and all the rest that those afternoons [at school] held, out of reach forever” (102). Her mother’s past deed comes back to haunt Denver in the form of a distorted story of herself reflected by a classmate, and prevents her from focusing on her forward progress, internalizing a sense of inferiority through a classmate’s casual comment.

Contemporary students might experience similar feelings of shame when confronted with inaccurate histories of their ancestors, histories that indicate they themselves have inherited some kind of inferiority based on genetics. M. Gerard Fromm’s 2018 book *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma Across Generations* is a collection of essays focused on the Holocaust exploring “the idea that what human beings cannot contain of their experience – what has been traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable – falls out of social discourse, but very often on to and into the next generation as an affective sensitivity or a chaotic urgency” (Fromm
In other words, trauma victims who cannot communicate clearly in verbal form, end up communicating via projected fears and anxieties that affect the development of their children. As Denver eventually realizes that her mother’s recovery depends on her reaching out for help from the community that has shunned them, she worries about expanding her horizon beyond her front yard, “out there where there were places in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them again it would happen again” (243-4). Sethe as a traumatized mother has been overprotective of Denver, and Denver internalizes this fear of the outside world until she herself is agoraphobic, avoiding places and situations that might bring reminders of the past or risk repeating that same danger.

**Chapter Conclusion**

Denver in a way represents the reader, specifically the younger generations within African-American communities: those who are expected to continue to progress forward and live more successful, less painful lives than their parents, but who struggle as a result of that past nonetheless. When the women gather outside 124 Bluestone Road at the end of the novel at Denver’s request to help exorcise the ghost, after avoiding Sethe for so long, they are instantly reminded of their past lives there: “the first thing they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves” (258). Denver’s presence, as symbolic of youthful innocence, untouched by the evils of whitepeople, reminds all the women of who they once were. The perpetuation of racial discrimination and violence in the “free” (but segregated) world after slavery can’t help but contribute to a growing sense of dread and anxiety for the parents who fear the worst for their children. In *Beloved*, Morrison makes clear reference to these external forces and their effects on Sethe’s already heightened anxiety when it comes to Denver. Sethe worries every time she hears
a horror story of racial violence, “whether the bubbling-hot girls in the colored-school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter’s private parts, soiled her daughter’s thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon” (251). Ultimately, the passing of trauma from one generation to the next within the Black community is made possible by the continued violence perpetrated on the Black community, especially women. Despite their separation from the original source of trauma (slavery), children like Denver might still experience generational poverty and lack of access to quality education, or they might be horrifically attacked or violated in the same ways their mothers were. Or, commonly in today’s society, they could just be going about their daily lives, doing all the “right things,” only to encounter innumerable microaggressions and daily reminders of their “inferior” status via the casual racism embedded within the mindset of so many Americans, or in the repeated unjustified and too often fatal violence inflicted on Black people by those in authority. All of these slights, small and large, are a continuation of the trauma of slavery and inflict their own kind of trauma on the descendents of the enslaved. In Beloved, Morrison shows how, as critic Andrew Levy summarizes, “the failure of storytelling as a folk process can debilitate the life of an entire culture, not just the individual for whom the process has failed” (118). If all the characters of Beloved reveal the devastating and long-lasting impact of repressed trauma, the turn of Morrison’s ghost story reveals how the recovery of those same lost storytelling traditions might shift the current dynamic to one of understanding and healing.
Is Healing Possible?

The real answer to my student’s misguided questioning of “why we need an apology for slavery” is that we don’t. Or at least, an apology is the very least of what we need. As long as American society lacks sufficient communal understanding of the necessity to reflect on and learn about the past, trauma theory expert Sandra Bloom writes, “Confrontation with the spiritual, philosophical, and/or religious context – and conflicts – of human experience is impossible to avoid if recovery is to be assured” (“Trauma Theory” 15). Recovery at the national level might include a greater understanding among citizens, a sharper idea of how to actually help and embrace others, and how to not repeat past cycles of discrimination. To achieve any progressive aims in the fight for racial equality in the United States, we need an increase in empathy more than anything else amongst the citizens of this country. And the path to greater empathy cannot be paved without storytelling, as Toni Morrison so artfully illustrates in *Beloved*. Deep pain and trauma must be talked about and understood in order to overcome it or avoid repeating it. Psychologists who help people with trauma know that victims often need to transfer the emotional memories into an external narrative, as Bloom says, “give it words,” and share it with others in order for healing to occur. Even in the very early stages of the development of trauma therapy, Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer observed upon studying a variety of psychiatric patients with histories of trauma, “Each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event… and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words” (“Bridging the Black Hole of Trauma” 209-10). In *Beloved*, Sethe learns that the only way to pacify the ghost she thinks is her dead daughter is to tell her stories,
providing the ghost with “profound satisfaction” and the time- and trauma-hardened Sethe with “an unexpected pleasure” (58). Storytelling is therefore the vehicle that possesses the power to turn disjointed memories into cohesive narratives, to turn stubborn stoicism into emotional freedom and give voice to those previously silenced, to reconnect mothers and daughters and turn broken families into healed ones, and to help a people torn from their homeland redefine home and themselves.

**America’s Ghosts**

The persistent refusal in our society to engage with the uncomfortable truths of the past contributes to the continued haunting of our present, the root of our society’s illness of ignorance and insensitivity to the interconnectedness of individuals within a collective. Every day, more news stories accumulate about school boards around the nation, made up of concerned parents, fighting to keep “upsetting” or “uncomfortable” content out of public school curricula in a misguided attempt to “protect” their children from the horrors of history. These efforts all but guarantee at least one more generation of divided, misinformed Americans, perpetuating cycles of prejudice and discrimination that have been at work for centuries. In *Beloved*, Sethe refuses to engage with her daughter Denver’s demand for stories, and Denver suffers as a result. Sethe is afraid that speaking the truth into the present will traumatize Denver, but the irony is that the refusal to process that trauma is what allows it to live on. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber’s work on group trauma and shared memory in Morrison’s *Beloved* asserts that the novel “demonstrates how generational transmission of trauma produces a cultural history that cannot be forgotten despite the will to repress it or dissociate from it” (32). In a community traumatized by slavery and the lingering persistence of white supremacist norms, what is communicated to the next
generation through the repression of the past can be detrimental to progress and healing: the history of violence and dehumanization and the continued mental enslavement to white conceptions of personal value and worth.

The parental fears of the descendents of both the oppressor and the oppressed reflect the key interpersonal reasons for the generational transmission of trauma, but society as a whole also presents its own obstacles in preventing access to opportunities and resources for victims of trauma to vocalize or process their experiences in a communal way. Toni Morrison’s emergence as a literary giant with access to the highest levels of the white-dominated publishing world, coupled with her drive to tell authentic stories of Black people, would alter the landscape for writers from historically silenced communities. In large part thanks to Morrison’s own work as a book editor, formerly voiceless writers of color, especially Black women, were able to produce opportunities for public catharsis in the form of formally published poetry, short stories, memoirs, and novels expressing the hardships and triumphs over oppression. Morrison of course encountered resistance to her own novels’ topics, describing how editors and publishers wondered why she would want “to disturb the scars, the keloids, that civil war, civic battle, and time itself had covered.” Regarding Beloved, she recounted that many thought, “little good could come from writing a book that peeled away the layers of scar tissue that the blackbody had grown in order to obscure, if not annihilate, the slavebody underneath” (“The Slavebody and the Blackbody” 74). Despite the existence of numerous “slave narratives,” little else in popular American literature from the 19th century well into the 20th delved deeply into the most shameful truths of American life and the interior lives of those subjected to it. The slave narratives produced in support of the Abolition movement, in striving “to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things. […] I’m trying to
fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left” (“The Site of Memory” 70-2). The eventual elevation of Morrison and her peers’ work to award-winning literature, international acclaim, and widespread popularity supports that readers are hungry for the work of writers like herself who “are becoming more industrious in substituting accuracy, other perspectives, other narratives in place of phantom histories, polluted politics, and media manipulation” (“The Slavebody and the Blackbody” 77-8). Throughout her fictional works, Morrison herself exemplifies this rebellion against stuffy rules of the past by effortlessly blending her classically trained skills at storytelling in the American literary tradition with several culturally specific storytelling traditions passed down through African American communities. And rather than crafting her work to appeal to a white audience as the Abolitionists did, Morrison deliberately wrote her literature for a black audience, reflecting a deliberate refusal by herself and her peers to continue performing for the approval of white Americans.

This rebellion was not a new concept but one passed down through at least a few generations of African American artists. In his famous 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Harlem Renaissance giant Langston Hughes describes the complex internal dilemma forced on African American artists by racism. In order to feel safe or accepted in mainstream American culture in the early 20th century, many African Americans would shun aspects of their own culture in favor of behaviors and artwork deemed acceptable by whites. Hughes feels sorry for such Black people, for “no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself.” In fact, Hughes rightfully points out that “without going outside his race … there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work” (93). He goes on to celebrate the culture of the “low-down folks” and express appreciation for the thriving folk culture that joyfully exists in Black America whether or not the “white gaze” is paying attention.
Beneath the surface of the mainstream literary and media culture, lives a pulsing, thriving, ever productive world of folk culture. The literature of “the people” shows the persistence with which stories make themselves necessary aspects of daily life. Oftentimes, such folk culture develops by virtue of a community’s lack of access to the privileged modes of expression (i.e. reading and writing, and especially publishing). History shows a consistent drive amongst human cultures to process collective trauma through artistic methods of storytelling, be they visual or oral, performative or written. Within many communities with a shared history, storytelling is a means of teaching the next generation what they need to know about their cultural heritage in order to carry on traditions and honor the struggles of the past. According to critic Elaine Richardson, in the African American community in particular, “Storytelling remains one of the most powerful language and literacy practices that Black women use to convey their special knowledge” (687). This knowledge is the armor their children can put on in order to navigate a contemporary America littered with landmines of racism. Throughout Beloved, oral storytelling and quilting are both meaningfully highlighted, both as part of the novel’s plot and as part of the style in which Morrison tells her story, with its lyrical language and patchwork quilt of chronology and perspective. Ultimately, while presented in the outward package of a novel published by a division of Penguin Books USA Inc., Beloved is actually a continuation of many centuries’ worth of subversive storytelling amongst African peoples, reflective of and paying homage to the non-mainstream forms of narrative prevalent in African American culture, particularly amongst women.
Morrison’s Ghost Story

If one was seeking to identify a “proper” American literary genre in which to place *Beloved*, it would appear the novel most closely aligns itself with Gothic Romanticism. This choice was not accidental. Historically speaking, Morrison noted that Romanticism in America, with its idealism, emphasis on innocence, natural goodness in man, and escape into fantasy worlds, arose in prominence at the height of America’s prosperity as a result of slavery’s practice in the new United States ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 173). Romanticism, in both its most uplifting and darkest forms, utilizes storytelling elements useful for the conveyance of big emotions, as Morrison describes in her 1992 work of literary criticism *Playing in the Dark*: “nature as subject matter, a system of symbolism, a thematics of the search for self-valorization and validation … the opportunity to conquer fear imaginatively and to quiet deep insecurities. It offered platforms for moralizing and fabulation, and for the imaginative entertainment of violence, sublime incredibility, and terror” (37). A university-trained student of literature, Morrison makes skillful use of many Romantic devices throughout *Beloved*, most especially in her integration of a ghost story into an otherwise realistic novel. Historically, Gothic literature and other Dark Romantic works became a means to explore both deep passion and pain in a way not typically permitted in buttoned up 19th century public life. The “haunted” house possessing an inhuman presence lurking in the hidden shadows is a common trope of the Gothic tale, “skeletons in the closet,” so to speak. The past confronts the novel’s protagonists in the form of the mysterious arrival of a grown woman who cannot help but remind Sethe and Denver of the dead infant of 18 years prior, refusing to let Sethe move on with Paul D until she is at peace. When we first meet the ghost in the flesh, she appears at the Bluestone Road house after Sethe, Paul D, and Denver return from their first “family outing” to a local carnival, a hopeful moment
in which happily ever after seems finally possible – the only problem is, Sethe and Paul D have not properly dealt with the “ghosts” of their past. Sethe and Beloved’s connection at first appears to be symbiotic, and the cleansing presence of water symbolically overwhelms them upon first meeting: “for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe’s bladder filled to capacity. […] the water she voided was endless,” while Beloved’s first request is for water to quench a seemingly insatiable thirst: “The woman gulped water from a speckled tin cup and held it out for more. Four times Denver filled it, and four times the woman drank as though she had crossed a desert” (51). The exchange of water lost and water gained between Sethe and Beloved could elicit a variety of interpretations, but if Beloved’s presence is meant to inspire healing for Sethe, the water could symbolize a baptismal cleansing of past sin. Beloved not only reminds Sethe of her pain through her shockingly accurate memories of the personal moments a baby might share with its mother, but through a slow unraveling of the truth of who Beloved is, exposes the deeply buried traumas of slavery for the entire community of free Black Americans.

The novel makes clear through the unravelling of its main characters as Beloved’s presence begins to dominate them that America’s deepest pain and haunting that lies ignored in the attic is actually its history with slavery. It is the conquering of Beloved’s ghost that becomes the central conflict of the novel. As Baby Suggs notes prior to her death at the suggestion that the family move from the house on Bluestone Road so filled with painful memories, “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (5). As ghost stories often reflect a past whose burial or closure is incomplete, the emergence of this ghost destroys any chance Sethe and others might have at continued success in ignoring the pain of the past. Dara Byrne writes, “Beloved’s return is not simply the visible manifestation of the town’s guilt for not
warning Baby Suggs of schoolteacher’s arrival. Beloved consequently enables the town to reestablish the continuity and vitality of the circle (intrinsic to African culture) by redressing the current fragmentation of their community consciousness” (45). While Sethe is certain that the young woman who calls herself Beloved is the ghost of her baby daughter come to life 18 years later, Beloved’s own words tell a different story that makes her much more likely one of the “sixty million and more” that Morrison references in the epigraph of the novel. In a 1987 interview about the novel with literary journalist Walter Clemons, “Morrison explains this figure as ‘the best educated guess at the number of black Africans who never even made it into slavery – those who died either as captives in Africa or on slave ships’” (qtd. in Broad 193). Morrison refers here to the Middle Passage and the unknown millions of Africans who lost their homes, family, dignity, and eventually lives before ever setting foot on a plantation in the American South. Suddenly, by understanding who Beloved really is, the communal nature of slavery’s wrongs unredressed for centuries is brought into greater relief, and the cycle of mother-daughter relationships severed by slavery reaches back even further to the shores of West Africa.

In a stand alone chapter late in the novel (210-213), Beloved is revealed to be the ghost of a teenage girl who was ripped from her home in Africa, along with her mother, by “men with no skin,” the only words she can think of to describe Caucasian people. In the chapter, Beloved, in choppy fragments oddly spaced, describes being crammed against countless others with no room to breathe or move in the depths of the slave ship, given no food or water (except the men with no skin’s “morning water”), losing grip of reality, and unable to find her mother amongst the crowd:

In the beginning I could see her I could not help her because the clouds were in the way
in the beginning I could see her the shining in her ears she does not like the circle
around her neck I know this I look hard at her so she will know that the clouds are in
the way I am sure she saw me I am looking at her see me she empties out her eyes
I am there in the place where her face is and telling her the noisy clouds were in my way
she wants her earrings she wants her round basket I want her face a hot thing. (211)

All of these seemingly nonsensical pieces, including phrases Beloved has been uttering to Sethe
and Denver since she first appeared at the beginning of the novel, suddenly fit when we separate
Beloved from who they think she is and place her in her original context. The “noisy clouds” in
the way are the gunfire and residual smoke that the European captors used to confuse their
targets and capture them amidst the chaos. Beloved’s African mother was picking flowers into a
round basket when the ambush came, wearing beautiful shining earrings that were presumably
taken and replaced by an iron collar and chains, the “circle around her neck” that reflects her
enslavement. When the dead bodies on the ship, one of whom had met his final rest while
crammed on top of Beloved, are removed and disposed of into the Atlantic Ocean, the girl finally
spots her mother who “empties out her eyes” staring at her daughter before willingly jumping
into the water to end her suffering. Many captured Africans chose suicide over whatever awaited
them on the ship and beyond. We learn that Beloved eventually followed her mother into death
after experiencing prolonged sexual exploitation and torture, also killing herself by way of
drowning. She emerges from this water at Sethe’s house and recognizes Sethe as the mother who
abandoned her all those generations ago on the ship. The reader then comes to understand why
“all [Beloved wants] to know is why did she go in the water in the place where we crouched?”
(214). Every ghost story is centered around the ghost achieving their goal: avenging a wrong,
finding what was lost, understanding their own death. While Sethe and Denver associate the
ghost named Beloved with the child they buried under a tombstone of the same name, a deeper
understanding of Beloved’s story tells us that, like every child, her goal is to “be-loved” by her mother, the traumatized mother who inexplicably left her on the deck of a slave ship. It is only in processing the whole picture, from the shores of West Africa to the streets of Cincinnati, Ohio, that we see it is all of slavery’s ghosts that demand to be acknowledged, understood, and loved before healing can occur.

Additional Romantic tropes and common literary devices serve to help Morrison replicate as best she can in words what Bloom calls the “cognitively disorganizing” experience of overwhelming stress and trauma. In her essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” regarding the opening of Beloved, Morrison described being “committed” to this “excessively demanding” opening: “The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign. […] Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another without preparation and without defense” (195). Morrison’s structural choices which emphasize a sort of fragmentation in Beloved, or breaking up of the story into non-linear pieces, may actually serve to make the experience of slavery more real to an audience than a chronologically developed, single-narrator’s story might. Structurally, the chronological order of events as they transpire prior to the 1873 “present” setting is revealed in disordered flashbacks over the course of the novel’s first 200-plus pages. In the first ten pages alone, the story jumps from the 1873 present day haunted house to Baby Suggs’ death over eight years earlier. Then, Sethe flashbacks further to a graveyard, selling her body to the engraver in exchange for the letters BELOVED on the tombstone of her dead child (though it still wasn’t enough to include “DEARLY”). Then the narrative jumps forward to the present and Sethe running to wash chamomile off her legs as she suddenly remembers an image of the Sweet Home plantation, and then it’s back to the present day again as she meets Paul D on her porch, having not seen him for eighteen years since leaving
Sweet Home (1-10). It is confusing to say the least for the unprepared reader, exactly the feeling Morrison intends to convey. With any trauma, there are two versions of the story operating inside one’s head simultaneously: the one that describes the event using words, and the series of non-verbal images and sensations that are permanently imprinted on the brain. The human brain’s emotional memory system is strongly connected with these images and sensations, the very part of our brain that takes over when we are overwhelmed with stress or fear. According to Bloom, “Our verbal and nonverbal memories are usually intertwined and complexly interrelated.” When a sufferer of PTSD has a flashback, “a sudden intrusive re-experiencing of a fragment of one of those traumatic, unverbalized memories,” they are not merely remembering a traumatic event; they are re-living it and all the non-verbal memories that came with it in the form of very real physical sensations. Trauma theory emphasizes that unprocessed traumatic memories remain “‘frozen in time’ in the form of images, body sensations like smells, touch, tastes, and even pain, and strong emotions” (Bloom “Trauma Theory” 5-6). Morrison understands that what she can do as a writer might just be what is necessary to bring a fresh and satisfying perspective to seemingly old history: “a word or two that turns the ‘not enough’ into more; the line or sentence that inserts itself into the nothing” (“On Beloved” 283). The right description of an event, the right metaphorical comparison or combination of adjectives might clarify something that others struggle to understand in a more literal sense.

Morrison uses the repetition of sensory details in her writing to replicate the persistence of these frozen memories. She voices this psychological experience through Sethe’s description of her own post traumatic brain chemistry:

Unfortunately her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field, running practically, to get to the pump quickly and rinse the chamomile sap from her legs.
Nothing else would be in her mind. The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made. […] Then something. The splash 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 feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes. (6)

Sethe unknowingly describes what psychologists would call triggers, present day sensory experiences that activate deeply buried memories. The memories might seem “lifeless” like the scar on her back, but any sensory trigger such as a certain scent or noise can take Sethe back to her past life at Sweet Home, and all the horrible memories associated with it. Throughout the novel, Morrison manages to find the most striking images nestled deep within the characters’ psyche to associate with the most gruesome traumas inflicted on them. For Sethe, the smell of “stolen milk” or the “mossy teeth” of schoolteacher’s nephews who held her down and took it are just a few of the repeated images that activate the reader's senses and enhance their connection to Sethe’s trauma (18, 70). Paul D fights to suppress his own frozen images that highlight his most devastating traumatic moments. Narrating his own approach to post-traumatic stress, “he had shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing. If he could do those things – with a little work and a little sex thrown in – he asked for no more, for more required him to dwell on Halle’s face and Sixo laughing” (41). These frozen images symbolize some of Paul D’s most heart wrenching and disturbing moments and any engagement with his emotions causes Paul D to see them repeatedly. “Halle’s face” was covered in butter; clearly, he had lost his mind after seeing his wife Sethe sexually violated by schoolteacher and his nephews. And Paul D witnessed “Sixo laughing” during Sixo’s execution
following the failed escape attempt from Sweet Home. Tied up to burn over a poorly built fire that only succeeded in burning his feet, Sixo laughs in a sort of madness at the absurdity of his executioners’ ineptitude, and screams “Seven-O!,” happily knowing that his girlfriend is pregnant with his progeny. He continues laughing until he is finally shot dead. The accumulation of unprocessed frozen memories in Paul D’s mind later in the novel is used to symbolize his breaking point. Shunned from Sethe’s house, sleeping at the local church, drinking heavily in a last attempt to drown the pain:

He didn’t know if it was bad whiskey, nights in the cellar, pig fever, iron bits, smiling roosters, fired feet, laughing dead men, hissing grass, rain, apple blossoms, neck jewelry, Judy in the slaughterhouse, Halle in the butter, ghost-white stairs, chokecherry trees, cameo pins, aspens, Paul A’s face, sausage or the loss of a red, red heart. […] How much is a n***** supposed to take? (235)

Paul D is drunkenly speaking to Stamp Paid and in his broken state, recalling every image that connects to every painful moment of his enslaved life. At this point in the novel, because Morrison has so carefully constructed the story, Paul D’s listing of these minute sensory details convey the enormity of the accumulation of trauma inflicted upon Paul and the others. Morrison’s storycraft excels in using sensory diction to invoke the desired horrified emotions and empathetic reactions from the reader.

Morrison juxtaposes the horror of slavery with symbols of untouched youthful innocence tragically destroyed, as Dark Romantics are inclined to do in order to highlight the darkness in society. The ghost is of course a child whose mother was taken too soon and fails to understand why. Sethe kills her child in order to free it from slavery. Morrison includes details to intentionally highlight this theme, such as when Sethe frequently references the dead child as her
“crawling-already? baby,” a sweet image of a baby just blossoming to life who would be dead within a month, crawling being just one of many milestones in childhood growth. It would be the last growth marker Sethe’s baby has and she fixates on it in the aftermath of her death. Another moment in the novel that seems to primarily exist to highlight the theme of innocence destroyed involves Stamp Paid, an otherwise stoic character who breaks down while on the banks of a river confronted with the horrific, irrefutable evidence of harm to an innocent Black child. Spotting something hidden in the brush near his boat, “what came loose in his hand was a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp” (180). This is the moment that Stamp Paid says “[wears] out his marrow.” Leaving the river with the ribbon in his pocket, his loss of breath multiple times along his route home and lack of appetite once he gets there reflects a physiological response often experienced by those having an anxiety attack. Stamp Paid, a character who self asserts that he’d seen it all, “smelled skin,” and witnessed the worst white people could do, is ultimately cowed by a reminder of so many innocent lives lost to the brutality of slavery. It is the unknown child’s murder that prompts him to finally understand what made Baby Suggs give up on life and subsequently make the effort to reconnect with Sethe as she battles to be free of Beloved’s ghost (181). These reminders of innocence lost are partially what drive characters throughout the novel to repair their damaged connections caused by the trauma of slavery.

Throughout the novel, like most Romantic literature, an abundance of natural imagery is presented to symbolically emphasize emotions; most profoundly, two passages use nature to dramatize Sethe’s most basic and fundamental maternal instincts: bringing life to one child and taking away the life of the other. Just a month before Beloved’s death, Sethe had given birth to Denver while en route to Baby Suggs’ house. Morrison breaks from narrating the gruesome and
stressful ordeal of Denver’s birth to offer an omniscient rumination on the hopes all mothers have for their children when they are born, utilizing the symbolism of budding flower seeds:

Spores of bluefern growing in the hollows along the riverbank float toward the water in silver-blue lines hard to see unless you are in or near them, lying right at the river’s edge when the sunshots are low and drained. Often they are mistook for insects – but they are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. And for a moment it is easy to believe each one has one – will become all of what is contained in the spore: will live out its days as planned. This moment of certainty lasts no longer than that; longer, perhaps, than the spore itself. (84)

Every parent hopes their child will fulfill “all of what is contained in the spore,” its potential. Morrison uses symbolic nature here to emphasize the inherently human drive to have hope for the future. Most enslaved mothers were only able to realize that hope for perfect, happy children for mere moments before the reality of their lives interrupted those dreams. Sethe’s nature-inspired dreams for her children grew fruitful for a whole month of freedom until the tragic murder of her child dashes those renewed hopes. In Sethe’s own recounting of the infanticide, a psychological justification for her behavior is punctuated by the natural imagery attached to her memory of the event:

Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over
there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on.

(163)

Stamp Paid continues this same aviary theme in his recounting of the infanticide, describing Sethe in that moment as a “hawk on the wing” (157). Because her trauma responses are triggered, Sethe only hears rapidly beating wings as she chooses “flight” over fight, and to others watching like Stamp Paid, she is reduced to the primitive image of a mother bird instinctually swooping in to save her young. This one moment in which Sethe is so traumatized by the sight of schoolteacher and his nephews is connected with the movement of a bird’s wings multiple times to convey the degree to which Sethe had lost connection with her rational human self. For Morrison, and so many writers, no tool but nature can serve to illuminate the emotional explosion of a work’s most dramatic moments.

**The Story to Pass On**

Sethe’s story is not new, but like many folk tales, has been passed down through American history since the 1850s, serving as artistic inspiration for many before Morrison took her turn at telling the tale. A headline in the *Cincinnati Gazette* on January 29, 1856 reads, “A Slave Mother Murders her Child rather than see it Returned to Slavery.” The real Margaret Garner, attempting an escape from slavery with her family, drowned her children to prevent them being taken back to slavery as bounty hunters closed in on them. Her story stirred up a 19th century media frenzy in a country moving toward civil war over slavery. The hope of Garner and the Abolitionists who supported her during trial was that she be tried for *murder*, which would mean that she and her children were actually *people*; however, the court decided to prosecute the death of the child as a case of *stolen property*. Margaret and her family in reality were returned to
slavery. Over the years, the horror of her story inspired poetry, art, comparisons to Greek tragedies – one source called Margaret the “Modern Medea” – and even an opera (Gorman). In the midst of the Women’s Movement debate over motherhood and its erasure of Black historical experience which partially inspired Beloved’s writing, Morrison “recalled a newspaper article [she] had read around 1970, a description of an abolitionist cause celebre focused on a slave woman named Margaret Garner who had indeed made such claims” to be a mother to her children (“On Beloved” 282). Morrison’s transformation of Garner’s story into a ghost story, centering the anger of a child who doesn’t understand her mother’s actions, not just Sethe but generations of mothers “abandoning” their daughters because of slavery, serves as Morrison’s reminder for the contemporary audience that slavery “haunts us all. That in so many ways all our lives are entangled with the past – its manipulations and, fearful of its grasp, ignoring or dismissing or distorting it to suit ourselves, but always unable to erase it” (“On Beloved” 284).

The central story of the infanticide and its folk tale-like origins are emphasized by its retelling three different times beginning just about in the exact middle of the novel: once from schoolteacher’s perspective, once from the witness Stamp Paid, and finally from Sethe herself. While each character may bring their own distortions to their perspective of the event, the truth is only fully understood by knowing all three perspectives. In this manner, the book carries on a powerful folk tale for future generations of Black Americans, a story which might help them make sense of history and to explain why they are where they are today.

While Morrison displays clear skill with literary devices recognizable to a trained “academic,” she simultaneously celebrates uniquely Black cultural traditions in conveying storytelling’s path to healing from racial trauma. Despite the fact that African-Americans and other marginalized American communities were traditionally excluded from the high culture of
“literature,” stories of oppression, pain, and ultimate triumph found ways of being passed on regardless. In “Bridging the Black Hole of Trauma,” Bloom cites evidence from as far back as Ancient Greek and Native American cultures showing the historically significant relationship between cultural healing and the arts (198-99). Telling stories, sharing experiences, and communicating our emotions via words, images, music, movement, or essentially whatever medium is available, are essential elements of how we all make sense of the world and of ourselves. African peoples shipped to the Americas brought with them unique storytelling traditions from their respective homes, and held on to them, adapted them, and passed them on to the next generation, despite their captors’ attempts to stamp out any connection to their homeland. The oral traditions of many African cultures featured communal storytelling practices such as improvisation, call-and-response, and repetition, practices passed on through generations of Black storytellers from Southern plantations, to the jazz and blues clubs of the 1920s, to hip hop music records today (Sale 41). African American oral traditions also include an abundance of ghost stories, highlighted in published works like Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*, reflecting an attempt to reckon with the most recent history in being brought to America unwillingly under such horrific conditions. The continuous themes amongst most of the stories told through these oral and musical performance mediums recount tales of repression, endurance, suffering, and ultimate freedom, either in life or after it. One of Sethe’s only memories from the plantation where she was born is watching the older slaves dancing and Morrison implies their connection to African performance traditions: “Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they dance the antelope. The men as well as the ma’ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did” (31). It’s not possible that Sethe has ever seen an antelope, but she
knows it by the style of dance she sees her mother doing. Sethe’s memory recalls the seeming magic of their dancing to her young eyes, the inherent connection she feels to them conveyed through her matching pulse.

In addition to Sethe’s vague memories from her childhood, Morrison highlights these African oral and musical traditions most directly through Baby Suggs and her role as preacher and leader of the community of former slaves living in Ohio, before the infanticide shatters the community’s unity. Baby Suggs’ ceremonies provide a space for healing, her sermon in the “Clearing” imploring the formerly enslaved men, women, and children of the community to release their pain through laughter, dancing and tears, and love themselves, as not existing in relation to white supremacy, but thriving despite of it (87). By channeling the storytelling mediums of the ancestors such as communal singing, dancing, and spoken word, Baby Suggs’ reminds her followers of their inherent identity and humanity. Baby Suggs calling for the people to find healing in her dancing circle exemplifies the bridge Sandra Bloom describes in writing about the role of art in healing from trauma: “Artistic performance is the bridge across the black hole of trauma, the evolved individual and group response to the tragic nature of human existence.” (“Bridging the black hole” 210). Before the infanticide, Sethe experiences her own catharsis under Baby Suggs’ preaching. She describes the gift she and others gained in this practice: “Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (95). The community embrace coupled with expressed permission to love oneself punctuates this very brief moment of healing that Sethe experiences before the baby’s death traps her again in another kind of prison of trauma and isolation. Baby Suggs commands Sethe and the group of former slaves in the Clearing to love every part of themselves: “the beat and beating heart, love that too. More
than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize” (88-9). Because of the way that slavery depletes a person’s ability to love others, to hope and plan for the future is a profound resistance against slavery’s robbing of its victims’ humanity. The “Clearing” could be so named because it is the place where Morrison provides the most clarity about what is needed in the process of healing from these generations of trauma.

Perhaps there is no better subversive storytelling art more representative of these themes of community and perseverance through oppression, and more distinct to African American culture, than quilting. The skills required of their enslavement, making and mending clothes for the master and his family, often led to incredible talent among many African American women for sewing, which for many could be channeled into quilting. Enslaved women would use recycled scraps and rags and techniques rooted in African culture to create designs in their quilts that conveyed stories of great pain and loss, community and love. Throughout antebellum communities in the South and the North, quilting served many purposes: community, economy and rebellion, catharsis from pain, and in some cases, created as Underground Railroad symbols for runaways or sold in support of anti-slavery organizations. Since it was illegal for slaves to learn how to read and write, quilting became one of many ways in which enslaved African people expressed themselves despite their exclusion from mainstream modes of written communication. In “Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition,” Dr. Floris Barnett Cash writes, “The voices of black women are stitched within their quilts” which offer a means to “discuss the lives of African-American women whose experiences are peripheral to the center” (30). Cash explores how “black women used their creative ability to ‘make do’ with whatever they had.” To exemplify this kind of persistence in Beloved, Morrison
shows how despite Mrs. Garner condescendingly laughing at Sethe’s request for an actual wedding after agreeing that she could marry Halle, Sethe finds a way to “salvage” her dignity and pride essentially through quilting: “I made up my mind to have at the least a dress that wasn’t the sacking I worked in. So I took to stealing fabric. […] The top was from two pillow cases in her mending basket. The front of the skirt was a dresser scarf a candle fell on and burnt a hole in, and one of [Mrs. Garner’s] old sashes we used to test the flatiron on” (59). The dress constructed from the same strategies Black women used to construct their quilts symbolizes Sethe’s perseverance in hanging on to her humanity through her marriage to Halle. By celebrating these subversive triumphs over slavery’s deprivations, Morrison shows how quilting can also be seen as a means of responding to, and perhaps experiencing some catharsis from, the trauma. Quilts, like any other form of storytelling, are the result of, as well as the release from, the oppression of the past.

Though Sethe’s wedding dress is a strong symbol in itself, quilting is used as a metaphor throughout Beloved, woven into the fabric of its plot and key to understanding Morrison’s ultimate call to her readers. Historically, in the slave community, Cash writes, “female [quilting] networks promoted self-reliance and self-help. They sustained hope and provided survival strategies” (31). Black women carried these concepts of mutual assistance with them from bondage to freedom. In Beloved, not only are there specific quilts in the story that carry this clear symbolic meaning, but the entire novel is in itself a quilted collection of stories. Understanding that healing only happens when people come together, Morrison seems to be suggesting, as critic Andrew Levy says, “perhaps the story is meant to be told multivocally, as a fluid amalgamation of many individual perspectives” (115). The disordered flashbacks that make up Morrison’s quilt-like plot convey Sethe and her peers’ stories of enslavement in a multitude of voices
sharing their perspectives on the same events. In telling the story of former slaves, the structure of the novel is, in a sense, a patchwork quilted collection of fragmented slave narratives. Throughout the novel, the same event is sometimes told by two or more different characters, with minor details signaling the transition from one point of view to the other. The communal nature of quilt making is mirrored in the communal nature of the story *Beloved* tells. In the end, Beloved’s revelations of her own story of the Middle Passage provides the final piece of this quilt that tells slavery’s story. Morrison’s structure suggests a symbolism in how people might join their stories together to feel more individually “whole.” In the end, Sethe’s healing is not the work of herself alone or even her immediate family, but the whole community of women who come together to march on Sethe’s haunted house and exorcize the ghost. Despite the years of animosity built up between them, when the women hear that the ghost of slavery’s past is torturing her, one of them, Ella, explains the prevailing sense of communal protection against these hauntings, “Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. […] The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn’t stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out” (256). Ella therefore gathers about thirty other women to march on Sethe’s house and help her. The symbolism used within the story itself and in the framing structure of the text reveals that we cannot merely work to dismantle external systems of oppression – true freedom and justice occurs when change is generated from within a family or community, as well.

Finally, within the story itself, Morrison utilizes a specific quilt’s presence in the haunted house at 124 Bluestone Road to signify *Beloved*’s ultimate themes about remembering the past, unification over separation, and hope for the future. The quilt in the house is one we can reasonably assume was transported from a life in slavery to free life in Ohio. Perhaps symbolic
of an entire lost generation of former slaves, no longer here to tell their stories, the quilt remains in what used to be Baby Suggs’ room, the only physical representation of the deceased woman. A “dominating feature” in the way Baby was a dominating woman, the quilt is “made up of scraps of blue serge, black, brown, and gray wool – the full range of the dark and the muted that thrift and modesty allowed. In that sober field, two patches of orange looked wild – like life in the raw” (38). If Baby Suggs’ quilt tells a story, perhaps it is that of the dark and numbing existence of slavery, punctuated by brief moments of hope represented by the orange patches. This hope is what Baby clung to in her final days of despair following the death of her grandchild, and it is this hope that reemerges for Sethe and her daughter Denver with the reappearance of Paul D and the manifestation of Beloved herself. When Paul D decides to call on Sethe after so many years apart, he rekindles the connection he had hoped for many years before when they were both enslaved on the Sweet Home plantation. After allowing Paul D into her bed and her life, and wondering how she should handle the formerly suppressed emotions bubbling up inside her, Sethe “was distracted by the two orange squares that signaled how barren 124 really was. He was responsible for that. Emotions sped to the surface in his company” (39). In this scene, the quilt’s orange squares of hope highlight the reconnection of Paul D and Sethe, a re-stitching, if you will, and signals the beginning of the journey for both of them to relive and expunge the memories that haunt them. The exhausted and mysterious Beloved is later made comfortable upstairs and proceeds to sleep for several days in the keeping room, where “it took three days to notice the orange patches in the darkness of the quilt. […] She seemed totally taken with those faded scraps of orange, even made the effort to lean on her elbow and stroke them” (54). Beloved’s fascination with the colors of the quilt are later shown to trigger Beloved’s memory of the flowers her mother was picking when they were stolen from their home in Africa.
Because Beloved believes that Sethe is her lost mother, she thinks, “Sethe is the one that picked flowers, yellow flowers in the place before the crouching. Took them away from their green leaves. They are on the quilt now where we sleep” (214). Later, as Denver relates the story of Sethe’s escape from slavery and her own birth along the way, “The dark quilt with two orange patches was there with them because Beloved wanted it near her when she slept. It was smelling like grass and feeling like hands – the unrested hands of busy women: dry, warm, prickly” (78). This description of the quilt “feeling like hands” hints at the circle of women from whom Denver and Beloved descend who might have made this quilt, a community effort that could potentially wrap both Denver and Beloved in its warm embrace.

Like the warmth provided by a well-made quilt, when individuals unite in a shared effort, stitched together by their understanding of each other’s pain, healing takes place. Quite literally, the community of the Underground Railroad helps to bring Sethe to freedom. As Baby Suggs and the other women work to alleviate her immediate pain and treat the wounds from her most recent whipping, the lasting scars begin to set in. Sethe’s “spirits fell down under the weight of the things she remembered and those she did not” (98). Safe amongst these women who will wash her wounds, Sethe is able to momentarily release her pain and trauma. Chronologically around this same time, Paul D also gains freedom through community action when the men on the chain gang work together to escape as a mudslide threatens to kill them all in their sleeping chambers. Morrison’s description clearly hints at the theme of unity: “Some lost direction and their neighbors, feeling the confused pull of the chain, snatched them around. For one lost, all lost. The chain that held them would save all or none” (110). The chain, the thing that binds them, quite literally the source of their confinement and a symbol of the experience of slavery they have all endured, is the thing that will help them break free of the sleeping chambers. A
variety of other moments symbolize this theme, such as the image of Sethe, Paul D and Denver “gliding over the dust holding hands” on their way to the carnival, causing Sethe to think, “Maybe [Paul D] was right. A life,” signaling that the image of the three together as a family is enough to infuse a little bit of hope for the future into Sethe’s “empty” soul (47). Metaphorically speaking, Morrison suggests that former slaves bringing their stories of enslavement together is needed for the community to not only survive, but thrive.

The novel’s climactic scene of the community’s women coming together in a cathartic reunion reflects the importance of such bonds amongst black women and the power of using their voices to resist in whatever way possible. In the end of the novel, as Sethe’s guilt over killing her daughter begins to consume her, and Beloved refuses to relent until Sethe explains why she “went into the sea” (which Sethe cannot do), Denver chooses to boldly seek the community’s help, and come it does. Though not exactly a quilting circle, the women of Sethe’s community fittingly make do with what they have in coming together to save Sethe from her ghost of guilt and shame: “Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith – as shield and sword. Most brought a little bit of both” (257). The ghost is finally eradicated by the unified women coming together, “building voice upon voice” until they had created “a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods of chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (261). The natural imagery of this passage emphasizes the enormity and depth of the pain the women are there to eradicate, from the oceanic journey across the Atlantic to the segregation and racism permeating their own lives. The baptism of Sethe indicates the biblical profundity and significance of the cleansing of this pain, the ridding of the ghost. The fact that the women not
only make their physical presence known, but also their voices heard points to the importance of communicating the pain in order to move past it. The community effort to save Sethe from herself is a new manifestation of the kinship quilting circles that allowed slave women to feel some sense of community, identity, and self-esteem.

**Chapter Conclusion**

Finally, at the end of the novel, Paul D finds a depressed Sethe in the bed humming absentmindedly, “lying under a quilt of merry colors” (271). No longer engulfed by the darkness of repressed memories, the quilt is now “merry” and “colorful.” Though the presence of Beloved was literally killing her, once the ghost is gone, she is depressed and lost without the usual presence of her guilt and shame. The loss of her ghost feels like the loss of her whole identity. She says, seemingly out of context, “I made the ink, Paul D,” referring to the ink she made that schoolteacher used to write down his animalistic labels for her and the other Sweet Home slaves in his notebook. She goes on, “He couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink.” (271). In the world of slavery, forced illiteracy meant that the ability to write was associated with the power of the slave master, and certainly in literary studies, the written word tends to carry more authority than other modes of expression. One day at Sweet Home, Sethe overhears schoolteacher commenting on one of his pupil-nephew’s drawings of Sethe: “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (193). In this moment, schoolteacher stripped Sethe of power and autonomy in many ways, and in using the ink she made to label her, he also took her identity and sense of self-worth, as well. Despite her inability to read, Sethe clearly understands that schoolteacher does not think of his slaves as human beings but as animals. Sethe feels “dirty” because she is
somehow made to participate in her own degradation. Like many in American society still to this day, schoolteacher does not believe Black people have the ability to feel one way or another about what he is doing in dehumanizing them, does not understand the mental and emotional damage caused, or if he does, he doesn’t care. Sethe proves that she is fully capable of understanding the implications schoolteacher’s “research” is making, that she is deeply affected by it, and is made to feel not just violated, but “dirtied” by it because of her own forced participation in making the ink, reinforcing “that anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up.” In her journey through the novel of taking back her story by telling it in her own way, she takes back the power over her life and rediscovers her intrinsic value.

The novel’s final scene between Sethe and Paul D most poignantly punctuates the symbolism of the quilt, the importance of connection, and the healing power of storytelling. After Beloved’s exorcism, Sethe, though healed in some ways, struggles to feel hopeful for the future. Her own sense of her humanity and self-worth is still stuck in the pages of schoolteacher’s notebook, where he implored his nephews to track her animal characteristics. With the ghost Sethe kept as her closest companion gone, she is missing what she considered her best thing: “The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing – the part of her that was clean” (251). Paul D and Sethe allow each other to remember the past and hope for the future at the same time. When she first contemplated the drab quilt with the two orange squares at the beginning of the novel, she wondered about the meaning of the word “plans” as they pertained to Paul D, symbolic of hope for the future: “Sethe smiled just thinking about what the word [plans] could mean. It was a
luxury she had not had in eighteen years and only that once. Before and since, all her effort was
directed not on avoiding pain but on getting through it as quickly as possible. […] Would it be all
right to go ahead and feel?” (38). However, in despair at the end of the novel, she regresses and
reiterates her loss of hope: “Oh, I don’t have no plans. No plans at all” (272). As Paul D attempts
to get her up and out of bed and offers to rub her feet, she “sees it – the thing in him, the
blessedness, that has made him the kind of man who can walk in a house and make the women
cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. Cry and tell him things they only told each
other” (272). Likewise, though Paul D has spent the majority of his time away from Sweet Home
locking away his memories, he observes Sethe lying under “the quilt patched in carnival colors,‟
referencing the hopeful moment at the carnival they attended where their little family of shadows
held hands. Looking at the quilt, Paul D remembers Sixo trying to describe what he felt about his
girlfriend, the Thirty-Mile Woman: “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces
I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order” (272). Paul D realizes that
Sethe is this person for him and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face: “You are
your best thing, Sethe. You are.” (273). Paul D realizing that Sethe is the only one who truly
understands him expresses the goal Morrison has for her readers: “Only this woman Sethe could
have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers. ‘Sethe,’ he says, ‘me
and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow,‟” in effect
asserting that she has intrinsic value and restoring the hope represented by that carnival colored
quilt.
Conclusion

Morrison’s novel is an attempt to lay bare and put to rest the difficult stories that infect the present, in order to allow something positive and triumphant to replace the dominant oppressive narrative in the minds of many African Americans. In “The Slavebody and the Blackbody,” Morrison writes, “When what has happened is finally understood or is a forthright assertion of civic or public pride, tombs and palaces are built, flowers heaped, statuses rise, archives, hospitals, parks, and museums are constructed” (77). History can only be honored if it is properly remembered. Morrison’s novel is a reckoning with slavery and “the emotional fallout that extended long beyond its supposed abrupt halt in 1865” (Larson par. 9). In *Beloved*, it is only once the full, disjointed story has been revealed that the novel’s main characters and the entire community can begin to heal, as evidenced in the women’s exorcism. Along her perilous journey on the Underground Railroad to freedom, Sethe encounters young Amy Denver, a white runaway of her own sort, who saves Sethe and helps her give birth to the baby Denver (hence, the name). As she painfully cleans the wounds on Sethe’s back from schoolteacher’s whipping she says, “More it hurt more better it is. Can’t nothing heal without pain, you know” (78). It is through the communal sharing of trauma, however painful that process might be, that the wounds of the past can begin to heal. Morrison shows her readers the incredible progress that Denver makes once she reaches out for community help. Free from her mother’s past, Denver has found a sense of self-worth by the end of the novel as she encounters Paul D on the street on the way to her new job and speaks authoritatively, without anxiety or fear (266-7). Because of the exorcising of Beloved’s, and slavery’s, hauntings, Denver is now able to move forward confidently in the world, and her transformation is clear. Cash writes, in the quilting kinship networks developed during slavery, “African-American women were motivated by kinship across generations.
Mutual cooperation and concern are aspects of the tradition of self-help and self-reliance in the Black Experience” (38). For the “Sixty Million and more” who died enslaved and the millions more who continue to suffer the lingering effects of slavery’s legacy today, telling stories that pain us is a necessary salve on history’s wounds, and an essential talisman on the continued journey to freedom.

The American people’s relationship to slavery and racism has changed quite a bit since I first wrote the beginnings of this thesis circa 2016, and it continues to evolve. A quick Google search of the term “Critical Race Theory” returns immediate current results of battles waging all over the country over what and how much children should learn about our country’s history with slavery. Critical Race Theory, or CRT, is an academic term coined by legal scholars to describe the systemic nature of racism in America, beyond the individual acts people perpetrate against each other. In recent months, Republican politicians have sought to rile up their base with baseless claims about the “indoctrinating” effects of these concepts on young Americans in school, despite the fact that CRT is a concept reserved largely for the college classroom. Ignorant parents fear that by learning about the unjustifiable crime against humanity that was American chattel slavery, their white children will somehow be forced to feel responsible for that history, when in truth, the only thing we are responsible for is the future. These are only the most recent efforts in book banning and cultural policing, common reactions against communal growth seen when society seems to want to move politically to the left. Despite these contrarians, there are so many Black stories being told today, and more and more willing to listen. True political change is brewing, as well, though still facing a mighty resistance.

Since we’re all English majors here, I won’t have to work hard to convince you that a piece of literature is perhaps the medium with the most intimate connection with its audience.
When I read a book, my mind is filled with imagery it must conjure up using the words provided by the author; it’s a dance that affords the author quite a bit of power in what images it places before the reader. *Beloved* illustrates with its imagery, an unconventional structure, and uniquely Black storytelling techniques, the Truth of traumatic experience. This thesis concludes that despite the shattered lives and communities that trauma creates, *Beloved* also reveals how the cycle of the generational transfer of trauma may be interrupted by the ability to share these truths in a way that feels self-generated and authentic, not only in written content, but in the artful use of literary devices to convey internal feelings. In *Beloved*, when both the verbal and non-verbal communication of Morrison work in harmony, so do the characters find relief from their pain.

The same might be said for the union of narrative with fragmented memories – allowing a complete story to be told about trauma, so that the reader might not just have an intellectual reaction but an emotional one as well – a response that is the essence of true empathy. In “The Slavebody and the Blackbody,” Morrison is speaking about other artists whose work is on display at the opening of a museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, but she might as well be talking about herself as well and the powerful contribution she’s made to making our world just a bit less toxic:

> Through their art, their taste, their genius we see African American subjects as individuals, as cherished, as understood. Viewing this display of their force, their life-giving properties, their humanity, their joy, their will ought to be enough to forestall the reach of racism’s tentacles. Ought to be enough to protect us from its uninformed, uneducated, relentlessly toxic touch. Just as the commitment of this community ought to be enough. Don’t you think? Thank you. (78)
Works Cited


https://doi.org/10.21971/p74k59.


Grabes, Herbert. “Cultural Memory and the Literary Canon.” *Media and Cultural Memory* pp. 311-320.

Hebel, Udo J. “Sites of Memory in U.S.-American Histories and Cultures” *Media and Cultural Memory* pp. 47-60.


