

Mémoire de Master



Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines

Master ITC

2023/2024

The Body in *Beloved*

Melahat KAVAK

Mémoire dirigé par:

Bertrand ROUBY

Maître de Conférences

Département d'Études Anglophones

[Page intentionally left blank]

I, Melahat KAVAK, confirm that the work presented in this term paper is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the term paper.

[Page intentionally left blank]

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my research supervisor, Mr Rouby, for his patience and feedback, without which this endeavor would not have been possible. I am also grateful for the support and guidance of my professors, whose contributions were invaluable in this process.

Many thanks to my classmates for the mutual assistance throughout the year, the help with the editing, the feedback, and the long study sessions.

Lastly, I'd like to mention my family, friends, and especially my partner. Their constant support and faith in me kept my motivation high and helped me when I needed it the most.

[Page intentionally left blank]

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	4
Table of Contents	6
Introduction	8
1. Characters' Bodies as a Testament to the Realities of Slavery	9
1. 1. Fragmented Bodies.....	10
1. 1. 1. The Chokecherry Tree.....	12
1. 1. 2. The Circled Cross.....	14
1. 1. 3. The Smile.....	15
1. 2. Controlled Movements.....	17
1. 2. 1. Sweet Home.....	19
1. 2. 2. The Bit.....	24
1. 3. Rootedness/Rootlessness.....	29
1. 3. 1. Paul D's Wandering.....	29
1. 3. 2. 124 Bluestone Road.....	32
2. Body & (Hi)story	35
2. 1. Beloved and the Self.....	36
2. 1. 1. Interpretations of Beloved.....	36
2. 1. 2. Necessity of a Body.....	37
2. 1. 3. Body and Narration.....	39
2. 2. "Marketable Body".....	40
2. 3. (Re)claiming the Self.....	43
3. The Body of the Text Mirroring African American Culture	46
3. 1. Fragmented Text.....	47
3. 1. 1. Gaps.....	48
3. 1. 2. Timelessness.....	50
3. 1. 3. Circularity.....	52
3. 2. Orality in Beloved.....	53
3. 2. 1. African American English.....	54
3. 2. 2. Call and Response.....	56
3. 2. 3. Counter narrative.....	57
3. 3. Musicality in Beloved.....	59
3. 4. Aurality in Beloved.....	62
Conclusion	67
Table of Illustrations	69
Bibliography	70

[Page intentionally left blank]

Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, published in 1987, is a novel following the lives of a Black family, especially of the protagonist Sethe, who tries to build a peaceful life despite the weight of their past and the ghost haunting their house. Inspired by the true story of a former slave Margaret Garner who killed one of her children and tried to do the same to the three others in order to prevent them from being captured by her previous owners, the ghost haunting Sethe, who is Garner's placeholder, is that of the daughter she murdered. While the narrative present takes place after the Civil War, the story is disrupted by many flashbacks retelling events before the abolition of slavery and leading to Sethe's elder daughter's death.

In the essay "The Slavebody and the Blackbody," Morrison reflects upon a previous interview:

Having published a novel investigating the lives of a family born into bondage, I was being asked about the need for, the purpose in articulating that unspeakable part of American history. [...] The question seemed to suggest that, whatever the level of accomplishment, 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.¹

The question and Morrison's reflection about it show how the author, going against widespread mindsets, wishes to give more visibility to the realities of African American conditions during slavery. "Motivated by the desire to rescue a history from the oblivion to which both victimizers and victims have condemned it and to grant subjects — in the ruthless and racial sense of being "in subjection" (OED)— an access to self,"² in *Beloved* Morrison creates African American socio-cultural realities with the use of the body of the characters and of the text.

This paper will analyze how Morrison proceeds by studying different bodily fragmentations of the characters first, then how the body is used in concert with narration to create an identity, and finally how those ideas reflect on the body of the text.

¹ Toni Morrison, "The Slavebody and the Blackbody," *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*, 2019, p. 79.

² Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, "Narration, Doubt, Retrieval: Toni Morrison's 'Beloved,'" *Narrative*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1996, p. 109.

1. Characters' Bodies as a Testament to the Realities of Slavery

Beloved contains many instances of Black bodies in pain, wounded, injured, or scarred. In “The Site of Memory,” Morrison explains how in traditional slave narratives the authors proceeded with caution and censored themselves when depicting violence in order not to hurt readers’ sensibilities and to match what was considered socially acceptable. She continues by explaining how she discarded those concerns and “rip[ped] that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate’”³ to be able to faithfully show Black people’s “interior life.”⁴ This includes, but is not limited to, the physical violence they went through, the limits imposed upon them, and how their experiences during their enslavement kept impacting them even after gaining their freedom.

1. 1. Fragmented Bodies

Different kinds of bodily fragmentation can be found in *Beloved*, with Black characters often bearing marks of fresh or old and scarred wounds. Sethe’s back after being whipped by Schoolteacher’s nephews is arguably the most prominent example of this⁵, but it also includes her raw feet when she fled from Sweet Home, Beloved’s scars “the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place under her chin” (239) and “three vertical scratches on her forehead” (51), or Ella, one of the women in the Black community of Cincinnati, whose waist is scarred from her experience as a sex slave for a father and his son during her teenage years: “She remembered the bottom teeth she had lost to the brake and the scars from the bell were thick as rope around her waist.” (258)

Bodily fragmentation can be injuries with long-lasting consequences as well, like Sethe’s mother-in-law Baby Suggs’ hip because of which “she jerked like a three-legged dog when she walked,” (139) which was caused by a White man who “knocked [her] down” (139) after she made a mistake.

Morrison also describes brutal deaths, like Sixo, one of the Sweet Home men, being burned then shot in the head, Black people, including Sethe’s mother, being hanged, as well as less detailed mentions of violence towards Black people such as:

³ Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 235.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See 1.1.1. for an extensive analysis.

Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. (180)

The enumeration in this quotation illustrates how common and prevalent violence towards Black people was at the time, even nine years after the abolition of slavery. Introducing this enumeration with “whole towns” indicates that the violence is so large in scale that it is unaccountable and yet Stamp Paid, a former slave who is part of the Underground Railroad, who helps other slaves to break free, and whose point of view this passage is from, tries anyway: “eighty-seven lynchings,” “four colored schools.” His following statements “grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults” seem paradoxical and highlight two different aspects of whippings. The first part implies that whipping is for children and that adults (“grown men”) getting whipped is infantilizing and the psychological consequence, the humiliation of being subjected to this treatment, seems to be the biggest concern. The second part highlights the physical violence of this punishment and how inhumane it is to inflict that upon children. On the whole, this seemingly simple passage shows both the mental and the physical toll this punishment has on slaves, the universality of such treatment since White people spared neither adults nor children, and the initial paradox conveys the disbelief people must have felt seeing that such violence persisted even after the Emancipation Proclamation. With *Beloved* in general and this passage in particular, Morrison “challenges the notion that the end of institutional slavery brings about freedom by depicting the emotional and psychological scars of slavery as well as the persistence of racism.”⁶

In her book *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, June uses the term fragmentation in a broader sense and also includes women’s “lack of full reproductive rights”⁷ which can be seen in the novel with Sethe’s rape by Schoolteacher’s nephews, Baby Suggs’ “eight children [having] six fathers” (23), Ella’s experience as a sex slave, Stamp Paid’s wife Vashti being repeatedly called by her master for sexual favors, and other mentions of sexual assault on Black women.

⁶ Linda Krumholz, “The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1992, p. 396.

⁷ Pamela B. June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, Peter Lang, 2005, p. 5.

According to Raynaud:

*Avant que l'écriture n'émerge, que la voix n'habite le texte, que les ragots ne se fassent récits et les rumeurs romans, le corps parle par ses cicatrices, ses marques, sa noirceur. Il témoigne et raconte, lieu d'une écriture première, de l'expérience, de l'inscription de la 'race'. A partir de sa matérialité, de sa noirceur et de sa visibilité, le récit perpétue une corporalité de l'écriture.*⁸

Fragmented Black bodies can thus be read as the vehicle of each character's story: all are linked with the common thread of violence from and subjection to White people, yet all have individual experiences that set them apart and are worth retelling. Morrison's depiction of those marks is not only a narrative tool to add depth to both character and story but is a way for her to create an alternative and arguably more accurate version of history, one where the (former) slaves' perspective is at the forefront. She explains her attempt to:

take the imaginative power, the artistic control away from the institution of slavery and place it where it belongs— in the hands of the individuals who knew it, certainly as well as anybody, and that would be the slaves. And at the same time, not to dismiss it or denigrate its horror.⁹

1. 1. 1. The Chokecherry Tree

Sethe's scars on her back are the most obvious example of physical fragmentation and have an ambivalent meaning.

They were first introduced when Sethe described them to Paul D as "A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves. But that was eighteen years ago. Could have cherries too now for all I know." (16) The metaphor of the chokecherry tree is the main one used to refer to Sethe's back and is reiterated throughout the novel. However, other characters use other images: Baby Suggs sees them as roses instead of a tree ("Roses of blood blossomed in the blanket covering Sethe's shoulders" (93) and "the flowering back" (93)), and Paul D sees an intricate ironwork ("he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (17)). These

⁸ Claudine Raynaud, *Toni Morrison, L'esthétique de la survie*, Belin, 1996, p. 103.

⁹ Morrison, "The Source of Self Regard," *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 304.

poetic descriptions of Sethe's wounds and, later, scars echo the blues tradition where pain becomes a source of lyricism and is an instrumental part to attain transcendence. Ellison writes:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near tragic, near-comic lyricism.¹⁰

And yet, despite her usage of lyricism reminiscent of the blues, Morrison refuses to glorify the pain her characters, and thus Black people, went through. Paul D, one of the Sweet Home men who becomes Sethe's lover, disenchanted after being intimate with Sethe, comments that "the wrought-iron maze ... was in fact a revolting clump of scars. Not a tree, as she said." (21) Not only that, but he later adds "the 'tree' lying next to him didn't compare." (22) Paul D's reaction, the disgust he expresses ("revolting") as well as the disdain towards Sethe ("the 'tree'" where the quotation marks add a layer of cynicism to the word) present a view of Sethe's scars without any verbal embellishment. Beloved thus "refuses to celebrate the pain that has produced these fragmented figures ... Even momentary attempts to recuperate a violent past for the sake of transcendence are met with the implied accusation that such interpretive gestures occlude the horrific moments of slavery."¹¹ Sethe's scars, despite the poetic descriptions, therefore remain "signs of ownership inscribing her as property, while the mutilation signifies her diminishment to a less-than-human status."¹²

This is reminiscent of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," a short story in which criminals are executed with a device, the apparatus, which inscribes the rule the transgression of which led to the punishment into the criminal's very skin. Extreme symbol of ownership and power, especially in the execution that was taking place in the narrative present of Kafka's text where the criminal was unaware of his crime and his punishment both, the apparatus does literally what the whipping did symbolically to Sethe. "Because the scar tissue is without sensation, ... Sethe's back is, in a sense, not her own; it has been appropriated and reified as a tablet on which the slave masters have inscribed their code."¹³ While Sethe's back has no

¹⁰ Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," *The Antioch Review*, vol. 50, no. 1/2, 1992, p. 62.

¹¹ Kristin Boudreau, "Pain and the Unmaking of Self in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved,'" *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1995, pp. 453-54.

¹² Mae G. Henderson, "Toni Morrison's Beloved: Re-membering the Body as Historical Text," *Comparative American Identities*, p. 68.

¹³ Jean Wyatt, "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's Beloved," *PMLA*, vol. 108, no. 3, 1993, p. 478.

literal writing, her scars are attached to a story and an event which correspond to the transgression of a given rule, which the character associates to a particular scene, and thus the character figuratively keeps the scene alive.

Furthermore, Sethe's comment that the tree "grows there still" (17) demonstrates the enduring aspect of her trauma: "The markings are the memories of their stories which must be faced, submitted to, and accepted if any interior freedom is to be gained."¹⁴ Since the tree keeps growing, it means that Sethe has yet to tend to her wounds, if not physically then mentally. Despite being technically free and living a relatively peaceful, if lonely, life, the fact that she has yet to accept her past ("To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay." (42)) means that Sethe is unable to move on and be truly free.

1. 1. 2. The Circled Cross

The mark on Sethe's mother, a circled cross, highlights another dichotomy of these physical fragmentations. The circled cross is first mentioned when Sethe replies to a question from Beloved regarding her mother. Sethe says: "Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark'" (61). Henderson explains how "[h]er [Sethe's] mother had transformed a mark of mutilation, a sign of diminished humanity, into a sign of recognition and identity."¹⁵

Sethe, understanding the value of the mark to maintain contact with her mother, wants one as well so that her mother can recognize her too: "'But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too'" (61). Sethe's mother slaps her for asking such a thing, and not only does Sethe remain without a mark until the whipping at Sweet Home, but also her mother's mark does not even serve the purpose her mother attributed to it, as at her death she was too unrecognizable to be identified even with this distinctive trait.

¹⁴ Dennis Patrick Slattery, *The Wounded Body: Remembering the Markings of Flesh*, State University of New York Press, 2000, p. 211.

¹⁵ Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", p. 77.

So, the circled cross carries a dual meaning. On one hand, it became an identifying trait. In that sense, it illustrates the impact of slavery on characters: whether they want it or not, this experience shapes them and becomes an integral part of their identity. Characters are never reduced to their (former) slave status, but it has an undeniable impact on them. On the other hand, the cross remains a sign of ownership, like Sethe's scars on her back, and is a constant reminder of a traumatic event.

1. 1. 3. The Smile

Beloved's scars are also notable as they are signs of violence inflicted by her very mother.¹⁶ After twenty eight days of freedom, Sethe, seeing that her former owner Schoolteacher had come to bring her and more importantly her children back to the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky, decided to kill her children to prevent them from going through what she did. She was stopped by Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs and managed to kill her eldest daughter only. Sethe's actions show both "selfless love and of possessive ownership."¹⁷ Morrison captures this dichotomy in an interview as such: "It was absolutely the right thing to do, . . . but it's also the thing you have no right to do."¹⁸ Raynaud draws a the following parallel between Sethe's actions and that of white slave owners: "*Elle possède le corps - la vie, le souffle - de son enfant alors que l'esclavagisme nie ce droit; le maître a droit de vie et de mort sur ses esclaves. En s'octroyant le droit du maître, Sethe prend sa place et dénonce l'objectification des êtres qui fonde le système.*"¹⁹ Ironically, while she was trying to save her children, Sethe's entitlement to their lives and bodies is no different from the ownership of slaves, as she arbitrarily decides that living as a slave is not worth living at all, thus installing a total power imbalance between her children and herself.

In a larger sense, Beloved's scars can also be read as the marks of the violence that happens within Black communities. Community and solidarity among Black people are important themes in the novel, important facts of the lives of African Americans to this day,

¹⁶ This works with the premise that Beloved is the daughter killed by Sethe. For other interpretations of this character, see 2. 1. 1.

¹⁷ Joanna Wolfe, "'Ten Minutes for Seven Letters': Song as Key to Narrative Revision in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Narrative*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2004, p. 266.

¹⁸ Mervyn Rothstein, "Toni Morrison, in Her New Novel, Defends Women," *New York Times*, 27 Aug. 1987, p. C17.

¹⁹ Raynaud, *Toni Morrison*, p. 83.

and were vital for slaves and/or former slaves at the time the novel takes place. And yet, for Morrison, the community can be “both a support system and a hammer at the same time.”²⁰ This is clearly shown when the Black community fails to prevent the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road from the arrival of Schoolteacher. While the community offers, or is supposed to offer, safety and support to their members, just like how a mother is supposed to provide safety and guidance to her children, in both cases a behavior shaped by trauma ends with disastrous results. *Beloved*'s wounds are then but a limited illustration of the violence that does happen within the community, or even within the closer circle of the family, and show how dysfunctional members of the community and/or of the family can be due to their previous experiences, how they are both “supportive and necessary, yet divisive and petty.”²¹

The marks on each Black body and the treatment they are subjected to allow Morrison to put forward individual experiences of slavery, which underline “the gap between historical experience and history, between the reality of the trauma and the interpretations that make sense of it.”²² The author thus creates a deep and textured account of slavery from the point of view of the slaves, which goes against the cold and impersonal facts that are often used in official versions of history. These micro-narratives, the multiplicity and variety of experiences as well as the distinct ways characters are shaped by them, create a complex microcosm of what slave life would have been like in the second half of the 19th century.

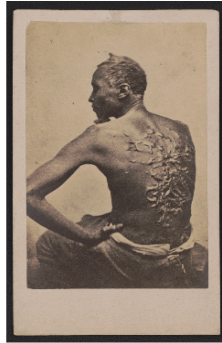
From Sethe's mother's mark to Sethe's, Morrison shows the impact of slavery through different stages of the system: Sethe's mother's circled cross epitomizes the conditions of first-generation slaves, those who were brought from Africa and had to go through the Middle Passage. Sethe's whipped back is representative of the infamous punishment slaves had to go through if they misbehaved, according to any arbitrary criteria established by their owners.

²⁰ Amanda Smith, "Toni Morrison," *Publishers Weekly*, 1987, p. 50.

²¹ Philip Page, "Circularity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1992, p. 32.

²² Clifton R. Spargo, "Trauma and the Specters of Enslavement in Morrison's 'Beloved,'" *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2002, p. 122.

Figure 1
“Whipped Peter”



Source: Library of Congress. Url: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.54375/>

Beloved's scars and Denver's deafness show how remnants of slavery can have a serious and lasting impact on former slaves' offspring, visible or not, even when they do not have any first-hand experience. Morrison's depiction of the different traumatic experiences characters from the same family underwent shows how pain permeates the experience of slavery through its different stages and affects even generations who have always been independent.

1. 2. Controlled Movements

On top of being hurt and wounded, Black people also suffered from a lack of freedom of movement in more or less invasive ways.

The entire system of slavery is of course based on the physical exploitation of Black people. The Middle Passage, the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean in slave ships, is perhaps the initial instance of forced movement Black people experienced from White people, brief depictions of which can be read in the scenes from Beloved's point of view. Afterward, slaves worked most notably as an agricultural labor force in plantations, the most common ones being tobacco and cotton plantations. *Beloved* also depicts corn and rice plantations, respectively Sweet Home and the place Sethe was before being bought into Sweet Home.

Women also frequently worked as servants in White households like Baby Suggs and Sethe at Sweet Home.

The slaves' stay in a single plantation was never guaranteed, as they could be exchanged or bought and sold by their owners on any occasion, like Sethe's or Baby Suggs' arrival at Sweet Home, Paul F being sold by Mrs. Garner after Mr. Garner's death, or Baby Suggs' separation from all her children except Halle, Sethe's husband. The narrator summarizes Black people's lack of agency regarding their movements through Baby Suggs' point of view:

in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, 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. (24)

The comparison with the checkers shows the commodification of Black people. The enumeration of verbs, all in passive forms highlighting the absence of control over their condition, lists the reasons why Black people were moved around, and gives an idea of how ubiquitous such treatment was.

On top of that, as mentioned before, it was commonplace for Black women to experience sexual abuse and rape, in this novel some examples of which being Sethe, Ella, Baby Suggs, and several mentions of nameless Black women.

Cases of imprisonment are depicted too. The most obvious one is Paul D's experience in a chain gang at Alfred, Georgia, which is such a big trauma that he is still affected by it in the narrative present, eighteen years later. Aside from this, other examples are Sethe's, and Denver's, imprisonment after Beloved's murder or Ella's captivity.

1. 2. 1. Sweet Home

Sweet Home offers a more intricate vision of the control White people exercised on Black people. Ironically named, as Paul D says it “wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home,” (14) this corn plantation in Kentucky where Sethe, Paul D, and Baby Suggs worked was owned by the Garners, who had a softer approach to slavery. Sweet Home was considered a “marked improvement” (134) by Baby Suggs, who had a permanent limp because of an injury sustained in a different plantation and who was also repeatedly sexually abused when she was owned by different people. Indeed, the Garners did not beat their slaves, they did not sexually impose either themselves or anyone else upon them, and even somewhat attempted to talk and establish contact with them. They even let Halle have additional work and earn money elsewhere in order to buy his mother’s freedom. Despite these, they still owned slaves, made them work, and forbade them from leaving the plantation without supervision.

An indirect criticism of Sweet Home and, by extension, of “good” slave owners can be read in the following passage: “Up and down the lumberyard fence old roses were dying. The sawyer who had planted them twelve years ago to give his workplace a friendly feel—something to take the sin out of slicing trees for a living—was amazed by their abundance.” (47) The addition of roses in order to alleviate the “sin” of destroying nature evokes the treatment of Mr. and Mrs. Garner towards their slaves as they, while treating their slaves arguably better than most slave owners did, still participated and benefited from the institution of slavery at the expense of Black people. The central word of this passage, sin, is commented upon in the context of Melville’s *Moby Dick* by Morrison, who writes that “Sin suggests a moral outrage within the bounds of New World man to repair. The concept of racial superiority would fit seamlessly.”²³

The sawyer’s effort to make his workplace more appealing by adding flowers is a mocking subversion of Sethe’s efforts to feel more at home at Sweet Home, as she:

had to bring a fistful of salsify into Mrs. Garner’s kitchen every day just to be able to work in it, feel like some part of it was hers, because she wanted to love the work she did, to take the ugly out of it, and the only way she could feel at home on Sweet Home was if she picked some pretty growing thing and took it with her. (23)

²³ Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 176.

The parallels between the two are clear: both characters took the initiative to bring flowers to improve a space, and the use of the expression “take something out of somewhere” in both extracts is an additional link between the two. However, there are key differences. Sethe’s efforts are to make her difficult experiences more bearable. Deprived of any possession she could call her own and desperate to feel even slightly at her place in a place she is forced to stay in, she attempts to alleviate the ugliness without. On the contrary, the sawyer tries to hide the ugliness, or the sin, he creates himself. The contrast between the two increases the pathos created by Sethe’s feeble effort to improve her conditions, if only a bit.

Among other things, the Garners negative treatment of Black people can also be seen in the fact that they gave the same name to all their slaves (Paul A, D, and F Garner), with missing letters insinuating that some brothers were either sold or died. Raynaud points out the symbolic importance of names: “*Les noms de ses héros ... signalent l’articulation du langage à l’identité du sujet et interrogent le lecteur sur ce geste de nomination dont les Noirs ont été dépossédés.*”²⁴ Paul D and his half-brothers, Paul A and Paul F, are only differentiated by a single letter, sharing the same first name and their owner’s last name. Names, whose main purpose is to differentiate individuals, are rendered useless: if everyone has the same name, then it is impossible to make a distinction between people, and everyone is merged into a single mass: “four boys, over half named Paul”(129) and “I can still smell the ears roasting yonder where the *Pauls* and Sixo was” (58, italicized by me). Consequently, the Garners’ naming habit for their slaves contributes to their dehumanization. Similarly, the fact that Baby Suggs is called by the name on her sales ticket, Jenny Whitlow, instead of her name of usage, shows the Garners’ disregard towards Black people, whose names they did not even try to learn.²⁵ “Mr. Garner,” she [Baby Suggs] said, “why you all call me Jenny?” / “Cause that what’s on your sales ticket, gal. Ain’t that your name? What you call yourself?” (131)

Although it seems unlikely that he was named by the Garners since he is not another Paul, the fact that Sixo is named after a number and not a real name proves the same point.

²⁴ Raynaud, *Toni Morrison*, p. 75.

²⁵ The difference between Baby Suggs’ official name and the one she uses can illustrate the points made in 3. 2. 3., that Morrison rejects official narratives, shows how what is presented as objective and unique truth is not, and gives power to the words of African American people.

This imposed namelessness “*leur interdit l'accès au statut de sujet, les rend invisibles, nie leurs liens à leurs proches, les exclut de la maîtrise que procure le langage.*”²⁶

Another instance of more subtle dehumanization is Mrs. Garner’s reaction to Sethe’s wish for a wedding: “They [the Garners] said it was all right for us [Sethe and Halle] to be husband and wife and that was it. All of it.” (57) and

“But I mean we want to get married.”

“You just said so. And I said all right.”

“Is there a wedding?”

Mrs. Garner put down her cooking spoon. Laughing a little, she touched Sethe on the head, saying, “You are one sweet child.” And then no more. (27)

The Garners granted Sethe and Halle a rare privilege for slaves: they gave them the right to marry. However, this right was superficial as apart from the status, which was informal, of a married couple, they did not get anything that was standard practice for White people’s weddings: no wedding ceremony, party, dress, cake, or anything else that would be part of such an event. Not only that, but even when she gave Sethe the authorization to marry, Mrs. Garner had laughed and seemed to see Sethe, and by extension Halle, almost like children playing pretend. Sethe and Halle’s blackness and slave status gave the Garners the license²⁷ to treat them in a constantly belittling way. Despite their better treatment, they displayed more subtle and underlying condescension and infantilization when interacting with their slaves.

Black people’s generalized distaste for White people –“There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks” (84) Baby Suggs forlornly says – even the better ones like the Garners or the Bodwins, the brother and sister who helped the Black community several times, is due to this hierarchy that is inevitably present between them, even when they try to act in more humane ways. Black people, reduced to slavery, correspond to the very definition of Latin *homo sacer*, or sacred life, which is explained by Agamben as “Life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed”²⁸ and “situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law.”²⁹

²⁶ Raynaud, *Toni Morrison*, p. 86.

²⁷ Morrison writes about “the violence, the criminality, and the license” in the institution of slavery in “The Source of Self-Regard” p. 301.

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 82.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 73.

At the two extreme limits of the order, the sovereign and homo sacer present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially homines sacri, and homo sacer is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns.³⁰

According to Agamben's explanation, the entirety of African American people are considered homines sacri and, because the existence of homo sacer always implies the presence of someone who exercises sovereignty over them, White people are all sovereign to Black people and all of them, as kind as they seem to be, profit from this hierarchy. Even when they decide not to partake in this system, only they have such a luxury and can decide to go back on their decision at any time: "She [Sethe] said there ain't nothing to go by with whitepeople. You don't know how they'll jump. Say one thing, do another" (73). Contrary to Black people who are sacred life, White people are all sovereign and can exercise their power in any way they want, including withholding active utilization of their sovereign power, and they can change their mind whenever they want without facing any retribution for it.

Stamp Paid's point of view regarding the Bodwins goes along the same idea: "the Bodwins—the white brother and sister who gave Stamp Paid, Ella and John clothes, goods and gear for runaways because they hated slavery worse than they hated slaves." (125) The Bodwins do not help the slaves because they see and value their individuality, nor is it out of the goodness of their hearts. Instead, helping slaves seems to be an unwanted byproduct of going against the institution of slavery in general, which might be due to any selfish reason going from simple contradictory spirit to benefitting from this opposition, be it in a material ("I got a job from them."/ "He got a cook from them, girl.") or immaterial way like having a feeling of moral superiority compared to slave owners ("She [Sethe] was a timely present for Mrs. Garner who had lost Baby Suggs to her husband's *high principles*." (13, italicized by me)).

The interactions between Amy Denver, the white girl who helped Sethe when the latter escaped from Sweet Home, and Sethe show how this hierarchy is present even under Amy's kindness: "The power relationships are manifest in the casually racist remarks of Amy and the deceitful acquiescence of Sethe."³¹ Amy seems disinterested when she first sees

³⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 84.

³¹ Morrison, "Goodbye to All That: Race, Surrogacy, and Farewell," *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 336.

Sethe, she does not show signs of willingness to help her and is even ready to leave Sethe in the state she was in, wounded and heavily pregnant. In Denver's retelling of her birth in particular, she seems nonchalant and unfazed by Sethe's situation: "Lord what a way to die. You gonna die in here, you know. Ain't no way out of it. ... Maybe you should of stayed where you was, Lu. I can see by your back why you didn't ha ha. ... You must of did something. Don't run off nowhere now" (74). Her repeated affirmations that Sethe is "gonna die," her chuckle "ha ha" included in a direct speech enhancing its effect, and the fact that she blames Sethe "You must of did something" hint at some lack of empathy even though she helps Sethe. Some of the "casually racist remarks" Amy makes include her mention of Sethe's "ugly black face" (79) and her repeated comment that she is "good at sick things" (79) where "sick things" could refer to Sethe's physical situation but could be a pejorative and objectifying way of designating Sethe too. Morrison thereby asserts that even the lowest of White people, an indentured servant, is still in a position of superiority compared to a Black person of similar standing.

In *The Color Purple*, an epistolary novel following the life of a Black community focusing on the protagonist Celie's growth and the way she comes to terms with her traumatic experiences, Alice Walker deals with similar themes and makes the same point as Morrison did. But where Morrison used an indentured servant to showcase White people's superiority in all circumstances, Walker did so with Sofia, a Black woman who was forced to work for a white household, and her perception of a white infant:

If not for her [Eleanor Jane, the white daughter of the household Sofia serves at], Sofia would never have survive living in her daddy's house. But so what ? Sofia never wanted to be there in the first place. Never wanted to leave her own children.

...
He can't even walk and already he in my house messing it up. Did I ast him to come ? Do I care whether he sweet or not ? Will it make any difference in the way he grow up to treat me what I think ? ... I love children, say Sofia. But all the colored women that say they love yours is lying. They don't love Reynolds Stanley any more than I do. But if you so badly raise as to ast 'em, what you expect them to say? Some colored people so scared of whitefolks the claim to love cotton gin.³²

³² Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017, p. 240.

The succession of rhetorical questions in this passage underlines how Sofia was not allowed to give her opinion on matters regarding her own house or even her own self. Her last remark, that “some colored people so scared of whitefolks the claim to love cotton gin” is highly sarcastic, cotton being closely linked to Black people’s forced labor which would more often than not lead to their deaths. The irony of her statement illustrates how far Black people have to go to avoid crossing White people.

This constant superiority and sovereignty over Black people, without regard to the characters’ status, is the reason why all White people are considered the same by Black people despite the occasional benevolence shown by some of them. “Grandma Baby said there was no defense—they [White people] could prowl at will, change from one mind to another, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did.” (219)

1. 2. 2. The Bit

The bit is a device used by slave owners to punish their slaves and is mainly present in *Beloved* through Paul D’s story. Put on him by Schoolteacher after a failed attempt to escape, no detailed description of the bit is given in the novel apart from Sethe’s observations or isolated details that are mentioned when necessary to describe Paul D’s experience: that it covers the mouth and irritates its corners, makes the wearer’s mouth salivate yet unable to spit, tastes like iron, and has spikes which further restrict movement.

Figures two and three are representations of punishment tools matching the limited description of the bit *Beloved* has.

Figure 2 & Figure 3

Fig. 2 (Left): *Châtiment d'esclave.*

Fig. 3 (Right): *Iron mask, collar, leg shackles and spurs used to restrict slaves.*



Source Fig. 2: *Souvenirs d'un aveugle, voyage autour du monde.*

Url: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ucm.5315353719&seq=144>

Source Fig. 3: Library of Congress. Url: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a32403/>

Morrison explains why so little description of the bit is present in her novel despite the major impact it had on Paul D: “Not describing it technically, physically, became more important because I wanted it to remain indescribable but not unknown.”³³ Indeed the bit remains indescribable not only for the narrator, who gives limited information about it, but also for the characters. When Sethe asks him if he wants to talk about it, Paul D replies “I don’t know. I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul. ... I just ain’t sure I can say it. Say it right, I mean” (68). Because he was so deeply affected by it, communicating the extent of his pain without breaking down almost feels impossible for Paul D.

³³ Morrison, “The Source of Self-Regard,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 306.

Some information is still given about the bit, especially the taste and the feeling around the mouth: Paul D says he was “licking iron” (69), Sethe thinks about “how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it” (68) and how “days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue” (68). The focus on the sensory experience of the bearer of the bit, and more particularly the focus on mouthfeel and taste, is what makes the bit “indescribable but not unknown.” Taste and touch, unlike hearing, smell, or sight, are very intimate, with physical contact being needed to have these sensory experiences. Instead of depicting it through the point of view of the witness, which would most likely imply a more distant experience of the bit, describing it from the point of view of the wearer makes the experience feel closer and more familiar. The metaphor of the “neck jewelry” (245) which Paul D ironically uses encompasses these sides of the bit: like a piece of jewelry, it is familiar and part of his daily life for a time.

The focus on and around the mouth is also symbolically relevant, since “*le port du mors devient métaphore du silence imposé aux esclaves, de leur statut de bête de somme, de cette chair meurtrie à l’endroit d’une parole étouffée par l’Histoire.*”³⁴ “I had a bit in my mouth” (67) Paul D exclaimed when pressured to give the reason why he could not explain to Sethe what had happened to Halle, whom he had seen mad, with butter on his face after seeing Sethe getting raped by Schoolteachers’ nephews. The bit was literally and physically the reason he could not communicate. But it also has a larger metonymic value, as Morrison explains:

What I needed then, to deal with what I thought was unmanageable [talking about slavery], was some little piece, some concrete thing, some image that came from the world of that which was concrete. Something that was domestic, something that you could sort of hook the book on to, that would say everything you wanted to say in very human and personal terms. And for me that image, that concrete thing became the bit.³⁵

The bit is thus a synecdoche referring to the institution of slavery. Paul D’s physical restriction by the bit and his inability to talk can then be interpreted as the institution of slavery silencing slaves in general. Moreover, Paul D’s hesitation and inability to talk in the narrative present, eighteen years after this incident and bit-free, consequently shows not only the long-lasting effects of the bit in particular but also of slavery in general.

³⁴ Raynaud, *Toni Morrison*, p. 16.

³⁵ Morrison, “The Source of Self-Regard,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 305.

The psychological consequences of the bit, and of slavery, are insisted upon first by Sethe, who repeatedly states that the bit put “wildness”(68-71) in the eye of the bearer, then by Paul D, with the comparison he makes between himself and Mister, a rooster at Sweet Home:

Mister, he looked so...free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son a bitch couldn't even get out the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was...

...

Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub. (70)

What matters most to Paul D is less having his movements restrained and being physically in pain, and more “the shame of being collared like a beast” (245). The fact that he started his comparison by “Mister, he looked so... free” clearly highlights that the biggest and most important difference between Paul D and Mister is Paul D's lack of freedom compared to an animal. The following comparatives “Better... Stronger, tougher” result from this initial fundamental difference between Paul D and Mister. The tragic yet humorous conclusion of this comparison is that the rooster Mister, who also notably has a name that gives him some prestige, unlike Paul D as was explained in 1. 2. 1., is “king” whereas Paul D was “...”. Paul D paused to gather his emotions, as the conversation was taking a toll on him, yet the “...” can also be interpreted as Paul D being nothing, “less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub,” void of word because not worth talking about nor defining, unlike a rooster. The binary structure in “Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was,” really stresses the differences between them. The fact that what could easily have been a single sentence was turned into two, one for each character, adds a syntactic barrier that increases the gap between their conditions, the animal's being far more favorable than the Black man's. To sum up, the dehumanizing effects of slavery, as represented by the bit, are such that even a rooster is, to take once more Agamben's ideas, sovereign to a Black person under this institution.

Although Paul D was the one who was shown the most with the bit, other characters are mentioned wearing it, notably Sethe's mother. About her mother, Sethe says that "She'd had the bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn't smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile." (185)

The effect the bit had on Sethe's mother is a permanent facial disfiguration. The first sentence indicates the frequency of this punishment and calls attention to the horrifying conditions slaves lived in. If wearing the bit once was enough to traumatize Paul D as much as it did, the reader can only wonder how much of an impact this had on Sethe's mother and how far this physical mutilation affected her psychology as well.

The self-contradictory expression "when she wasn't smiling she smiled" creates an uncanny image that shows the perversion of a sign of happiness by the bit/slavery. In addition to the circled cross that had been burned on her skin, the permanent disfigurement and scarification of Sethe's mother by the bit is another way in which her owners symbolically marked her as their property. This deformation is arguably even more disturbing than the others as her lack of ownership and control over something as minute as her facial expression shows the magnitude of her physical dispossession.

The repetition of the word smile creates a textual equivalent for the reader to Sethe's mother's reality. Instead of being an expression of happiness as it is supposed to be, Sethe's mother's omnipresent smile is a carving on her face which indicates the very opposite: the complete dispossession and dehumanization she went through and which took away all happiness "I never saw her own smile." The fact that the word smile is repeated four times in two sentences and that it conveys nothing but the appalling conditions she was in is the reader's equivalent of Sethe constantly seeing her mother's fake smile, fully aware that there is no real feeling behind it.

By depicting the experiences of those two characters, Morrison illustrates how uniquely the same punishment can affect different people. Her goals for *Beloved* include denouncing the institution of slavery and remembering a shared history, and yet her primary objective is to write about the people who suffered from it first and foremost, to:

take the imaginative power, the artistic control away from the institution of slavery and place it where it belongs— in the hands of the individuals who knew it, certainly as well as anybody, and that would be the slaves. And at the same time, not to dismiss it or denigrate its horror.³⁶

³⁶ Morrison, "The Source of Self-Regard," *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 304.

While it might seem paradoxical, Morrison's efforts to focus on micro-narratives, on stories of specific locations like Sweet Home, individuals like Paul D and Sethe, with their unique problems and experiences, and her strategy to use a small and concrete thing, the bit, to refer to slavery, instead of trying to write about the (hi)story of slavery in general³⁷, is what makes her narrative realistic and relatable.

1. 3. Rootedness/Rootlessness

Linked to characters' mobility, or lack thereof, is the more subtle and self-imposed kind of imprisonment. Unlike the previous cases, where Black characters had to submit to White people's decisions regarding their movement, there are cases where characters feel stuck, but in a situation of their own choosing.

As Sethe says, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (94). Both Sethe and Paul D are technically and physically freed from Sweet Home in the narrative present, have been so for eighteen years, and yet are unable to truly claim and use that freedom.

1. 3. 1. Paul D's Wandering

At the beginning of the story, Paul D is presented as a charismatic man, a free-spirited traveler, and a kind and compassionate lover. It is quickly explained that he is from the same plantation Sethe was from and that the two have not seen each other since becoming free, eighteen years prior to this interaction. A very quick line of dialogue between Sethe and Paul D, buried beneath the layers of information given during this very rich first chapter, hints that Paul D's charming exterior hides more: "You looking good."/ "Devil's confusion. He lets me look good long as I feel bad." (10) Turned into a joke, then quickly moved away from because of hints of a romantic relationship between the two characters, this can actually be seen as almost an instruction to pay close attention to Paul D to figure out what makes him

³⁷ Morrison has repeatedly talked about the overwhelming scope of such endeavor, and how she was both unable and unwilling to even attempt such a thing. See for instance her 1987 interview, "Toni Morrison on writing 'Beloved'", on Fresh Air YouTube channel.

“feel bad.” As it turns out, what creates such feelings in Paul D is the memory of his past, especially his imprisonment in the chain gang at Alfred, Georgia.

According to Keller-Privat, a traveler merges both active and passive forces;³⁸ active because they decide to move, to travel, they pick the destination if there is any, the time of the travel, the way, what is carried, or for what purpose. And yet, they are passive at the same time as the traveler is at the mercy of the weather, of the land, or of their bodily limitations. What Keller-Privat has decided to explore as an opposition between active and passive forces, I think can also be worded as an opposition between freedom and subjection. In his quest for complete freedom after the events he went through, Sweet Home, the bit, and the chain gang at Alfred, Georgia, Paul D travels for eighteen years. While free to make his choices, he also faces complete subjection to his surroundings; in his capacity as a traveler, he embodies these paradoxical yet coexisting ideas at once.

The following scene is from the first conversation Paul D and Sethe have in the novel, the first one they have after eighteen years of separation, in which Paul D mentions his travels.

“Eighteen years,” she said softly.

“Eighteen,” he repeated. “And I swear I been walking every one of em. Mind if I join you?” He nodded toward her feet and began unlacing his shoes.

“You want to soak them? Let me get you a basin of water.” She moved closer to him to enter the house.

“No, uh uh. *Can’t* baby feet. A whole lot more tramping *they got to do yet.*” (7, italicized by me)

Paul D says that he was constantly moving for the past eighteen years: “I been walking every one of em.” The choice of modals in his last line, “can’t” and “got,” implies that his travels were almost an obligation. “Can’t”, instead of an alternative like “won’t” which would perfectly match his circumstances, means that there is a reason why Paul D, a completely free traveler, cannot take a moment to soak his feet. His unwillingness to relax reflects his underlying guardedness. As for “they got to,” it almost implies that Paul D is forced to move. And yet, free from any external pressure and without any explicit reason that would justify it, the only explanation for his behavior is that it is due to his trauma. Shapiro draws the following picture concerning former slaves’ psychological states:

³⁸ Isabelle Keller-Privat, “The World made flesh: experiences in fragility in British travel literature,” *The Traveller’s Body in the Literature, Civilization, and Arts of the English Speaking world*. 12 oct. 2023, Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour, France.

The novel reveals how the condition of enslavement in the external world, particularly the denial of one's status as a human subject, has deep repercussions in the individual's internal world. These internal resonances are so profound that even if one is eventually freed from external bondage, the self will still be trapped in an inner world that prevents a genuine experience of freedom.³⁹

In a later part, Paul D states that he could not stay in a single place, with a single woman, for over two to three months, which was “about as long as he could abide one place” (40). Once more, the use of the modal “could” reveals that Paul D's travels are not a matter of preference, but of necessity. In his case, moving from one place to the next is the physical equivalent of trying to escape from his past and a necessity to soothe the anxiety of being reminded of the chain gang at Alfred, Georgia, where he had to stay either in a metal box at night or out breaking rocks during the day. He says that “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) The enumeration at the end is an exhaustive list of what he was allowed to do in the chain gang. In light of this information, the fact that Paul D keeps walking to cope and remind himself that he is no longer stuck in that place is understandable.

With his inability to settle and to enjoy life, Paul D is chained to his trauma. His traveling experience, echoing the literary tradition of slave narratives, is in fact subverted: instead of showing a man who is completely free, it shows a man who is so stuck to his past and to his trauma that he cannot not move, even when the alternative — settling with a woman or, a far smaller commitment, staying to soak his feet — is something that would be beneficial for him. Paul D's use of his physical freedom reveals in fact the mental prison he is in, which is illustrated by the recurring metaphor of the tobacco tin can.

Ironically for someone who wants to reclaim complete freedom after being chained and imprisoned, that metaphor creates a psychological prison for his true self and his deep feelings. The rust keeping the tin closed can be read as the mental toll his past has on Paul D. It is only after his altercations with Beloved, which in this paper is interpreted as facing the past, that the tobacco tin can loosens. In that sense, the fact that Beloved was able to push Paul D away from 124 Bluestone Road could be interpreted as the historical trauma Paul D

³⁹ Barbara Shapiro, “The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1991, p. 194.

keeps avoiding, instead of confronting and moving forward from, making him unable to stay with Sethe even when they were building a stable relationship.

1. 3. 2. 124 Bluestone Road

Whereas Paul D has mostly suffered from a lack of freedom of mobility, especially with the bit and Alfred, Georgia, one of Sethe's biggest traumas regarding slavery is the fact that the institution prevented her from being a (good) mother and wife, living at a time "in which marriage was discouraged, impossible, or illegal; in which birthing children was required, but 'having' them, being responsible for them—being, in other words, their parent—was as out of the question as freedom."⁴⁰ Paul D coped with his issues by constantly being in movement. As for Sethe, on the contrary, her experience led her not to move away from a place she should have left, the house she found refuge in after her escape from Sweet Home, 124 Bluestone Road.

Sethe has always wanted to have belongings and to belong somewhere, not as a possession or a commodity like she was considered with her slave status, but among equals. Yet, in her life at 124 Bluestone Road, she has neither. Surrounded by a Black community she is not a part of and living in a house she can barely handle instead of living peacefully in, her persistence to stay in a place because it is her own despite the fact that she is not welcome in it both fulfills and denies what she desired most when she was a slave.

When Paul D, sensing the wrath of the ghost haunting 124 Bluestone Road, insists that she should leave her haunted house, Sethe replies:

I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running—from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: it cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much. Now sit down and eat with us or leave us be.
(15)

⁴⁰ Toni Morrison, "Foreword," *Beloved*.

Eighteen years after the events that led to Beloved's murder, Sethe's rape at Sweet Home, the whipping, the escape, and Schoolteacher's attempt to get her and her children back, Sethe is still, literally and mentally, haunted by them. Her inability to let the past go ("But her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day." (68)) is reflected by the fact that she stubbornly refuses to leave her house, which becomes a metaphorical prison.⁴¹ And yet, she is aware that staying in that place does not bring her joy, as she says that, unlike her physical self, her "mind was homeless" (186).

Sethe talks to Denver about "rememory," her term for memory, and how it is linked to a geographical place:

Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over —over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you. That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what. (36)

Sethe thus warns Denver not to ever go to Sweet Home, as the place will always be inhabited by the rememory of what happened to her, which could actively harm her. Ironically, Sethe does not follow the instructions she gave Denver. By deciding to stay at the place where she killed her daughter, which is also a place of other less important negative events, like from which her sons fled and where she lost Baby Suggs, Sethe forces herself to live in the site of one of her biggest traumas. "124 Bluestone is unmistakably an architecture that reifies pastness and entrapment. Here, Sethe and Denver are locked in a persistent memory that refuses to set them free."⁴² Because living at the site of her traumatic memories traps her in her past, Sethe has no present ("start the day's serious work of beating back the past." (70)) nor a future ("The future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (42)).

⁴¹ Samira Kawash, "Haunted Houses, Sinking Ships: Race, Architecture, and Identity in *Beloved* and *Middle Passage*," *The New Centennial Review*, 2001, p. 74.

⁴² Andrew Hock Soon Ng, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Space, Architecture, Trauma," *Symplokē*, vol. 19, no. 1–2, 2011, p. 231

Instead of acknowledging her past and moving forward from it in order to heal, Sethe abandons even her previous attempts at just pushing it away when she realizes that Beloved is her dead daughter who came back “Think about all I ain’t got to remember no more”(183). Focusing all her energy on Beloved who is the past incarnate, Sethe becomes totally submerged by it as is stated in spatial terms: “Whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me. The world is in this room. This here’s all there is and all there needs to be.” As a result, she starts slowly withering away until Denver’s efforts and the community’s intervention saves her.

Paul D and Sethe therefore represent the two opposite ends of unhealthy coping mechanisms: the former physically and mentally flying away from his traumas and the latter refusing to retreat to heal and constantly pushing against her past not to give it any ground. Despite their efforts, they both have been haunted by the past, in Sethe’s case quite literally, and only at the very end of the novel do they acknowledge that they have some healing to do: “‘Sethe,’ he [Paul D] says, ‘me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.’” (245)

To conclude, Morrison creates an intricate picture of a slave’s life, using the body as a vehicle carrying a multitude of experiences, meanings, and symbols that help her flesh out the characters she created. The body is not, however, only a display to show the effects of the past. It, working hand in hand with narration, is an integral part of one’s identity.

2. Body & (Hi)story

2. 1. Beloved and the Self

2. 1. 1. Interpretations of Beloved

Beloved can be read as several things at the same time, all with the support of textual evidence.

The most widespread interpretation of Beloved is that she is Sethe's dead daughter who came back to life. This interpretation is the one Morrison gives most frequently, it is what Sethe and Denver think, and it is also the one mostly used in this paper.

Another possible reading of Beloved is that she is indeed a supernatural entity who has materialized, but instead of being the spirit of Sethe's dead daughter, it would be a succubus or vampire-like entity. This is justified by her thirst for stories, her sexual relationship with Paul D, as well as her exponential growth at Sethe's expense at the end of the novel.

To finish with, a realistic reading is also possible, in which case Beloved would in fact be a runaway slave girl, the one Stamp Paid has heard rumors about and which he mentions at Paul D: "Was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that's her." (235) All the readings can be valid and the text does not give any one truth on the matter. On the contrary, there is evidence supporting all those interpretations, letting the reader and the characters choose the one that seems more likely to them.⁴³

No matter the nature of Beloved, the general consensus is that she can be read as a materialization of the past, of guilt, or of trauma. If she is Sethe's dead daughter coming back to life, then her presence signals Sethe's lasting guilt and grief regarding the circumstances of her murder and she "forces Sethe to confront the gap between her motherlove and the realities of motherhood in slavery."⁴⁴

Additionally, Beloved stands for "a whole lineage of people obliterated by slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the Middle Passage, the 'Sixty Million and more' of

⁴³ The multiplicity of the possible readings of Beloved is in line with Morrison's overall writing strategy as well as her concerns with history and historical facts, see 3.2. for more.

⁴⁴ Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery," p. 400.

the novel's epigraph."⁴⁵ Read with this in mind, *Beloved's* anger and pain becomes that of millions of innocents who have suffered and died because of slavery be it before, during, or after the Middle Passage. Her material presence in the story forces then not only Sethe to confront the consequences of her child's murder, but also Sethe and all the Black characters to face their past haunted by slavery, and finally the reader, especially the American reader, to face this dark side of their national history as she becomes "the reader's ghost, forcing us to face the historical past as a living and vindictive presence."⁴⁶

2. 1. 2. Necessity of a Body

Beloved's presence in the lives of the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road was established from the very first lines of the novel: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (6). However, despite her continuous presence for eighteen years, she did not have an identity.

Her immateriality meant that she remained without identity and was limited to being "the baby" or "she" at best, or reified at worst, with her presence being (con)fused with the house and reduced to an indistinct "it." For instance, in the first sentence what the adjective "spiteful" qualifies is a series of numbers, which corresponds to the house. The one who is spiteful, however, is the baby who still blames Sethe for her murder. The repeated fusion between the ghost and the house, another example being the fact that Howard and Buglar went away because "the house committed" (6) something that went too far for them, shows the frequency of the ghost's reification, which anthropomorphizes the house at the same time.⁴⁷

Even though she could have a material impact, the unilateral aspect of this link — the baby's ghost acts a certain way and the living must deal with it — and the lack of physical presence means that she is not considered as being truly there, which is the reason of Sethe's wish: "But if she'd only come, I could make it clear to her." (11) Sethe's comment about her wanting her daughter to be here, her wish to see and talk to her daughter is a testament to the necessity of an incarnation for *Beloved* to be taken into consideration like a proper individual.

⁴⁵ Wyatt, "Giving Body to the Word," p. 474.

⁴⁶ Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery," p. 400.

⁴⁷ Hock Soon Ng, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," p. 238.

The fact that Beloved's acquisition of identity is a result of her materiality can also be seen in the fact that she gained a name only after her reincarnation. Before that, as aforementioned, she was only "she," "the baby," "it," or "the house." Further in the narrative past, she was only ever mentioned as "crawling-already", a nameless baby who was designated only in a way that showed her mother's stupor at the rate of her growth. Even Beloved is not technically the name Sethe gave her, as the word on the tombstone was but a reference to the preacher's words at the baby's funeral. In any case, the mere fact that the ghost got a name to be called by only after her physical presence is unlikely to be a coincidence. As is stated by Donald and Louise Cowan, "the metaphorical focus of *Beloved* is incarnation, the embodiment of spirit in the things of matter."⁴⁸

Finally, Morrison stated that she wanted to write about the story of Margaret Garner, who is represented by Sethe, but did not have the legitimacy to make any judgment on such a complex matter as an outsider. The initial reason for the reincarnation of Beloved was the necessity to have the victim, the only person who morally had the right to condemn Garner/Sethe, in order to create a dialogue exploring the intricacies of the situation. So Beloved's materiality also serves a metafictional purpose, as according to Caesar "*Beloved* exists because Beloved exists."⁴⁹ The use of the word 'exist' by Caesar is also noteworthy since with the contextual clues it can be understood that here the verb "exist" is associated with physical presence. I would argue Beloved existed before her materiality too, and yet reducing her existence to her physical presence in this sentence, while it might be for the sake of simplifying a complex situation, or an unconscious choice of word, is very telling and supports the arguments presented before. No matter the reason, as Caesar states, the novel as it is only exists because Beloved gained a body and the ability to properly interact with people around her, which prompted a series of events that created *Beloved*. As such, on top of the narrative and the symbolic purpose of her reincarnation, there is also a metafictional one.

⁴⁸ Donald Cowan and Louise Cowan, "*Beloved* and the Transforming Power of the Word," *Classic Texts and the Nature of Authority*, Dallas Institute Publications, 1993, p. 293.

⁴⁹ Terry P. Caesar, "Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's '*Beloved*,'" *Revista de Letras*, vol. 34, 1994, p. 116.

2. 1. 3. Body and Narration

Although the body is necessary to have an identity, it is in no way sufficient. Like the infant she was when she was killed, Beloved “is practically barren of stories and a history; her monstrosity gains in stature through the stories she devours in order to gain an identity her mother sacrificed.”⁵⁰ Beloved’s hunger for stories show how to become a person, one needs a (hi)story, a past, a narrative surrounding one’s life. Beloved, looking like a young woman yet having no past to speak of, takes that of Denver, of Paul D, and more importantly of Sethe. She is the one who manages to pry Paul D’s tobacco tin can open, she incites Denver to tell her stories, notably always about Sethe, and listens raptly. She lets Sethe apologize again and again, in vain.

The double need of both narrative and body is seen in the end, where Beloved is growing larger and larger while taking Sethe’s life force, and is always listening to Sethe’s apologies and stories about the past. Sethe, consumed by her feelings, offers her body and her story to Beloved.

The trap of explaining to Beloved why she murdered her is the fullest form of incarceration Sethe could ever impose on herself. She is willing to trade her stories to Beloved, but in doing so unwittingly becomes a slave to her own remorse and shame. Her dominant desire seems to include talking her way out of her past actions.⁵¹

The more Beloved steals Sethe’s food, stories, energy, and life, the bigger her body gets. Beloved gradually takes more and more space in the house and in the world, her presence and identity strengthens, even at the expense of her mother and Denver.

⁵⁰ Slattery, *The Wounded Body*, p. 223.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

2. 2. “Marketable Body”⁵²

The first part of this paper extensively analyzed bodies in pain and repeatedly showed how the bodies were linked to the institution of slavery. This part will show how this link between the Black body and slavery was created and how discourse surrounding Black people played a role in the dehumanization process.

Dobbs states that:

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* presents the psychological and aesthetic difficulties, as well as the cultural and political importance, of narrating the stories and histories of slave bodies in pain. In doing so, the novel discloses and attacks one of the fundamental assumptions of slavery and, to some degree, of present-day racism—namely, that “blackness” is equivalent to a usable, marketable “body.”⁵³

As Dobbs points out, the foundation of the novel, of African American culture, of slavery, is the reduction of the African body to a tool, a product, and property. Because the institution of slavery reduced black people — first Africans then African Americans — to their physical functions — how much they could lift, how hard they could work, how they could reproduce and thus maintain or even expand the labor force — the body becomes paramount when studying the effects of slavery, the conditions of African American people.

In the novel, this dehumanizing reduction of Black people to their physical abilities is shown in the passages depicting Schoolteacher’s treatment of the slaves at Sweet Home. For example:

the woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said *made fine ink*, damn *good soup*, *pressed his collars* the way he liked **besides having at least ten breeding years left**. But now she'd gone **wild**, due to the mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat her and made her cut and run. Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think--just think--**what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education**. (149, italicized and bolded by me)

⁵² Cynthia Dobbs, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited,” *African American Review*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1998, p. 564.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Here, Schoolteacher explains the value Sethe has for him. In italics are the reasons related to her abilities, the chores she does best, that makes her valuable to him. In bold, the analogies to animals, like how long she could still “breed,” her lack of civilization (“wild”), and a comparison to a horse used by Schoolteacher to explain the duty of the white man to educate their slaves without breaking them. The animalization of the slaves as is perceived by the slaves themselves can also be seen in Paul D’s comparison with Mister in 1. 2. 2. p. 27 and in Sethe’s outrage at the profoundly humiliating treatment she received “after they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses.” (183)

An infamous passage where Schoolteacher establishes links between slaves, particularly Sethe, and animals is the class he gave to his nephews where they had to “put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right.” (193) Sethe, who overheard this, is shown to be distressed by it. Even though she does not share it with anyone else nor is this the reason why she left Sweet Home, the impact it had on her can be seen at the end of the novel, when she sees Schoolteacher in Mr. Bodwin and she tries to kill him, ending her justification with: “And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no.” (251) While Schoolteacher’s exercise was not physically violent, it still had a tremendous impact on Sethe.

Another such impact is visible in Paul D’s point of view, where he “learns his worth.” (226)

He has always known, or believed he did, his value--as a hand, a laborer who could make profit on a farm--but now he discovers his worth, which is to say he learns his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future. ... He [Schoolteacher] would have to trade this here one for \$900 if he could get it, and set out to secure the breeding one, her foal and the other one, if he found him. With the money from "this here one" he could get two young ones, twelve or fifteen years old. (226-27)

Paul D, just like Sethe, is profoundly humiliated in the face of such an inhumane view of himself. The self-doubt Schoolteacher’s observations create is noticeable in the epanorthosis, the substitution of “has always known” by “believed he did.” Schoolteacher’s disregard for the slaves he owns is also apparent from the lack of use of their names, instead using wordings like “this here one” or “the other one” which highlight his perception of Black people as fundamentally lesser creatures, as well as easily replaceable commodities.

Schoolteacher's discourse, especially regarding his division of slaves' characteristics into animal and human ones as well as the monetary value he attributes to Paul D, might seem objective in his context. He uses a seemingly scientific method to classify his slaves' traits, and he explains the value he gave Paul D with a comparison to other slaves and an awareness of Paul D's abilities. Though this discourse is unacceptable to a modern reader, it still offers interesting parallels with contemporary American society. For Krumholz,

Schoolteacher's practices are basic to the institutional educational system of the United States, which may have gotten past the worst of schoolteacher's racial model, but still presents politically motivated versions of knowledge and history while masking these representations in a rhetoric of "facts" and scientific method. Through schoolteacher Morrison demonstrates that discourse, definitions, and historical methods are neither arbitrary nor objective; they are tools in a system of power relations.⁵⁴

Schoolteacher then represents the dominant discourse of his time, at least in the South, but can also be read as a representation of the shortcomings of mainstream discourses in contemporary United States. However, Schoolteacher can also be used as a starting point from which a counter-discourse can be built, as will be shown in 3.2.2..

To finish with, Henderson comments Schoolteacher's discourse effect on his slaves:

Schoolteacher possesses the master('s) text, ... he divides or dismembers the indivisibility of slaves' humanity to reconstruct (or perhaps deconstruct) the slave in his text. ... The dismemberment of Schoolteacher's method is the discursive analog to the dismemberment of slavery.⁵⁵

The body bears the marks and is representative of slavery, of the painful past, and of traumas. However, limiting the fragmentation to physical reasons and the consequences to scars only would not be accurate. Scarry says that "The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly present by destroying it, and to make the other,

⁵⁴ Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery," p. 399.

⁵⁵ Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," p. 70.

the voice, absent by destroying it.”⁵⁶ The deconstruction of Black people’s selfhood is thus due to verbal and physical dehumanization both.

2. 3. (Re)claiming the Self

Given the conclusion of the last part, it can be assumed that to (re)construct the self, physical and verbal processes would be needed. This healing process is embodied by Baby Suggs, holy.

Morrison mentioned her wish to depict “freedom as ownership of the body,”⁵⁷ and this is best seen in the scene where Baby Suggs becomes free:

But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, “These hands belong to me. These my hands.” Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? She felt like a fool and began to laugh out loud. (131)

Baby Suggs’ euphoria, almost childlike joy, at being free is accompanied by a newfound awareness of her body. She who had been dispossessed of her own body her whole life finally discovers her own self. The novelty of her situation is insisted upon a few pages later, when Baby Suggs tries to find what to do with “the heart that started beating the minute she crossed the Ohio River.” (137)

She decides to dedicate her life to the wellbeing of her community and starts preaching so that they can learn to love their bodies like she discovered how to when she became free. Krumholz says that “Baby Suggs creates a ritual, out of her own heart and imagination, to heal former slaves and enable them to seek a reconciliation with their memories, whose scars survive long (even generations) after the experience of slavery has ended.”⁵⁸ In her ritual, after inciting the Black community to express themselves in a cathartic way, laughing, dancing, and crying, she preaches for them to love their body. “Here,

⁵⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 49.

⁵⁷ Morrison, “On *Beloved*,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 279.

⁵⁸ Krumholz, “The Ghost of Slavery,” p. 397.

... in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard.”(83) The importance Baby Suggs gives to the body is clear from the repetitive use of the term “flesh,” as well as the enumeration of body parts (eyes, skin, hands, mouth, back, shoulders, arms, neck, liver, heart, eyes, feet, womb, genitals), which puts the body at the center of the healing process.⁵⁹

Her enumeration of body parts, reminiscent of the fragmentation slaves endure, serves the opposite purpose: Baby Suggs, holy, implicitly invites her community to gather their broken pieces so that they can be reassembled. “*Le corps comme le texte, démembré, fragmenté, devra être remembré (re-member).*”⁶⁰ This is also shown outside of the Clearing scene, in several instances where Sethe gets help: “She [Baby Suggs] led Sethe to the keeping room and, by the light of a spirit lamp, bathed her in sections, starting with her face.” (93), “Paul D dug it up, gave her back her body, kissed her divided back, stirred her rememory, and brought her more news” (189), or “Will he do it in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?”(244) Notably, both in the Clearing and out of it, the restoration of the self happens with the community, be it a gathering of a large group or a single person who helps.

The communal aspect of healing is better worded by Sixo when he talks about the Thirty-Miles 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. It’s good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind.” (245) Sixo’s words, with the repeated use of “mind,” also reveal the mental fragmentation that slaves undergo.

Baby Suggs does not simply tell her people to love themselves. Her speech, built with oppositions between “here” and “yonder,” between Black community and White oppressors, creates a different narrative which is part of the healing process. “Without diminishing the difficulties attending the enterprise, *Beloved* ultimately affirms narration as both a therapeutic necessity and a moral imperative, a way of constituting a self and of protecting a cruel reality against a comfortable amnesia.”⁶¹ Baby Suggs explicitly mentions the violence Black people suffer from White people: “Yonder, they flay it [the skin],” or “They only use, tie, bind, chop off, and leave empty” being two out of many examples. Her acknowledgment of the

⁵⁹ Cowan, “*Beloved* and the Transforming Power of the Word,” p. 298.

⁶⁰ Raynaud, *Toni Morrison*, p. 107.

⁶¹ Rimmon-Kenan, “Narration, Doubt, Retrieval,” p. 121.

harsh reality outside of the clearing, instead of undermining her purpose, reinforces the weight of her preaching as she incites her people to be united against adversity and to find and love themselves despite White people's views.

Because healing is both physical and narrative, when Paul D is ready, at the end of the novel, to begin his healing process with Sethe, he poignantly says that "He wants to put his story next to hers," (245) showing the importance of both narrativisation and of collaboration with the members (or here, with a member who is his lover) of his community to heal.

To finish with, Spargo mentions how certain parts of Baby Suggs' speech were "rhetorical reversals of traumatic phenomena, which is to say that they are constituted as figurative redemptions of the violences of history."⁶² Expressions such as "love your neck unnoosed and straight" or "the beat and beating heart" contain elements of historical violence inflicted upon the Black community, yet they are reclaimed by Baby Suggs in her speech.

Physical reality and narration work thus hand in hand in order for former slaves to (re)gain their selfhood and start their individual healing process within the community.

⁶² Spargo, "Trauma and the Specters of Enslavement," p. 118.

3. The Body of the Text Mirroring African American Culture

The previous parts focused first on the meaning behind characters' bodies, then on how body and narration form an identity and how they are used by White people to dehumanize Black people and then by Black people to reclaim their freedom. However, the body of the text itself is also an integral part of the creation of African American realities in the novel. Morrison states that:

There may be play and arbitrariness in the way memory surfaces but none in the way the composition is organized, especially when I hope to re-create play and arbitrariness in the way narrative events unfold. The form becomes the exact interpretation of the idea the story is meant to express.⁶³

So, the final part of this paper will analyze how the form of the text contributes to the ideas expressed in the story.

3. 1. Fragmented Text

Beloved is a carefully crafted story formed by the meticulous assembly of many narrative fragments. "In *Beloved* the reader's process of reconstructing the fragmented story parallels Sethe's psychological recovery: Repressed fragments of the (fictionalized) personal and historical past are retrieved and reconstructed."⁶⁴

Additionally, Boudreau states that: "The novel raises the possibility of communicating pain only to mock that attempt. [...] Pain communicates nothing if not its own incommunicability."⁶⁵ Because pain is incommunicable, because fragmented characters are wrestling with the effects of slavery and their traumas, and because the form is "the exact interpretation" of those ideas, the narrative has to be fragmented to reflect the states the characters are in. As June explains: "This fractured, ruptured writing, I believe, suggests a history of fragmented bodies and identities."⁶⁶ This narrative fragmentation takes different forms like gaps in the story, timelessness, and circular and not linear patterns.

⁶³ Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Fiction," *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 323.

⁶⁴ Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery," p. 396.

⁶⁵ Boudreau, "Pain and the Unmaking of Self," pp. 454-55.

⁶⁶ June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, p. 2.

3. 1. 1. Gaps

Emptiness and gaps contribute to narrative fragmentation. Their importance is revealed within the story by Ella, who listens to Sethe's account of her escape from Sweet Home and who pays attention to what is left unsaid: "Ella wrapped a cloth strip tight around the baby's navel as she listened for the holes -- the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask. Listened too for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind." (92) Ella's attentiveness regarding the gaps within Sethe's narration reflects the reader's attention to the missing pieces of *Beloved*. As Davis asserts:

Morrison's novel does not aim to fill in all the gaps of the historical past; the result of her literary archeology is not a complete skeleton, but a partial one, with pieces deliberately missing or omitted. Because the reconstruction is not total, the reader is engaged in the process of imagining history herself.⁶⁷

Some of those missing pieces are the lack of information regarding Sethe's sons Howard and Buglar, Sethe's husband Halle's unclear fate, and maybe the most important one, Sethe's future. While the end of *Beloved*, with the last dialogue between Paul D and Sethe, seems hopeful – indeed Sethe finally confronts her past and realizes that she is her own best self – this is but the first step of her healing process. If an optimist reading might interpret this ending as Sethe finally moving past her trauma, I would argue Sethe is only starting to acknowledge that there is something to move past from, which is far from meaning that she healed. As such, the arguably biggest part of her mental journey, the no doubt arduous healing process which would result with Sethe – and Paul D – claiming their freedom, is left untold.

When explaining some of the creative decisions she made in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison writes:

These spaces, which I am filling in, and can fill in because they were planned, can conceivably be filled in with other significances. That is planned as well. The point is that into these spaces should fall the ruminations of the reader and his or her invented or recollected or misunderstood knowingness.⁶⁸

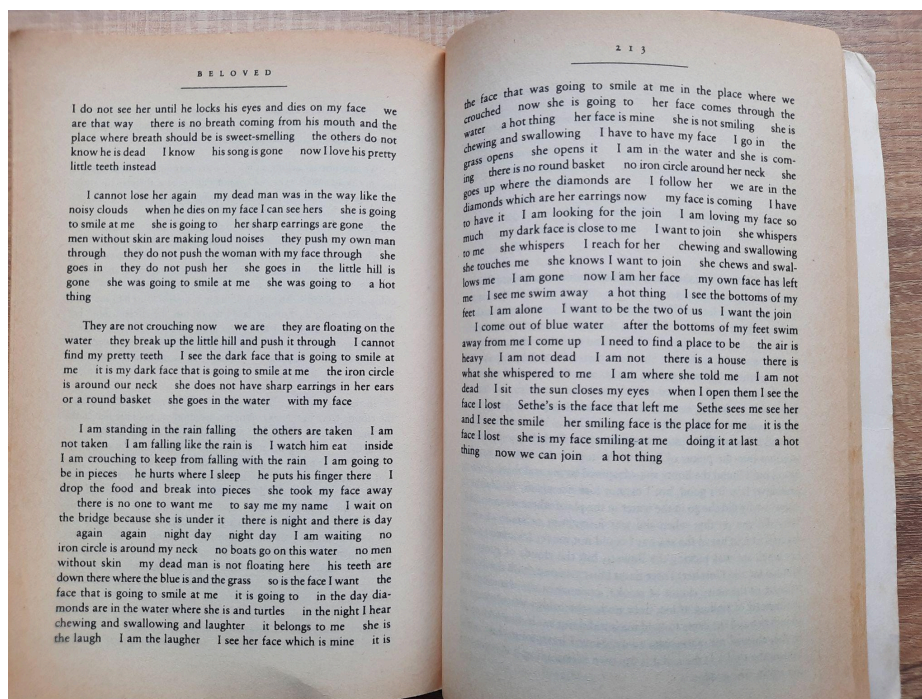
⁶⁷ Kimberly C. Davis, "Postmodern Blackness': Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the End of History," *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 44, no. 2, 1998, p. 252.

⁶⁸ Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 192.

These comments apply to *Beloved* too. For instance, the nature of Beloved is one of those spaces the author has filled but that can be filled differently: the most common explanation for Beloved is that she is Sethe's daughter's reincarnation, this explanation has been accepted by the main characters, and it is the one that is frequently used by Morrison in interviews or essays. However, other interpretations of Beloved exist, and evidence to support them is present in the book. Beloved as a reincarnation is then one answer, but it is not the answer to the questions surrounding this character.

To complete this narrative fragmentation, Davis points out the visual gaps in the book. "Beloved's disjointed narrative, composed of phrases with no punctuation, calls attention to the visual spaces on the page, a metaphor for the gaps in the storytelling."⁶⁹ The visual spaces she mentions can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 4
Visual Fragmentation



Source: *Beloved*, pp. 212-13.

⁶⁹ Davis, "Postmodern Blackness," p. 253.

Spillers explains that:

The fragmented syntax and absence of punctuation robs the reader of known demarcations, creating a linguistic equivalent of the Africans' loss of differentiation in an "oceanic" space that "unmade" cultural identities and erased even the lines between male and female, living and dead.⁷⁰

On top of those, separations between chapters, between parts, or even between paragraphs contribute to this visual fragmentation and the absence of chapter titles and/or numbers creates additional confusion, even if Morrison states that they were not a big part of her process and are only added "for the sake of the designer and for ease in talking about the book."⁷¹

3. 1. 2. Timelessness

Characters' rapport with time is a consequence of their unwillingness or of their inability to heal from their past. Characters like Sethe, Paul D, or Baby Suggs (after Beloved's death), with non-existent or unhealthy coping mechanisms, cannot live fully in the present and even less project themselves in the future because they are still chained to their past. For instance, the narrator expresses Baby Suggs' hopelessness with "Her past had been like her present." (4) Or "To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay." (42) In both cases, the past infringes on the present and prevents characters from moving on.

The following passage illustrates the complex relationships between the characters and their past:

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. Nothing. (6)

Here, Sethe insists that nothing would be in her mind. Yet, the mere fact of stating that followed by a description of what is not supposed to be in her mind contradicts the first

⁷⁰ Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, vol. 17, 1987, p. 72.

⁷¹ Morrison, "The Writer Before the Page," *The Source of Self-Regard*, pp. 262-63.

statement. The memory is rather detailed for such a short extract, with a comparison that shows how vivid it is (“skin buckled like a washboard”) and an enumeration of specific smells (“ink or the cherry gum and oak bark”).

This conflicting relationship is reflected in the narration with passages such as pp. 5-6 where different timelines can be present in the same paragraph with close to no sign hinting at the change. The narrator, from Sethe’s point of view, mentions her escape from Sweet Home, Howard and Buglar, a time where Baby Suggs was still alive, and the narrative present all in the same paragraph. This creates a sense of confusion for the reader and reflects the internal struggle of the characters.

This is all the more evident in *Beloved*’s chapters, where she seems to be living her death, a form of afterlife, the Middle Passage, and the present at the same time. The timelessness *Beloved* feels can be seen here: “All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching.” (210) In this passage, *Beloved* recalls or relives the Middle Passage. Despite the fact that she cannot be experiencing that during the narrative present, she clearly feels that way as is shown with the repeated use of “now,” of the present tense, and of the continuous present which is reinforced by “always”. Rimmon-Kenan explains it as follows:

the problem is not that *Beloved* does not remember the past, but that she does not remember it as a past [...] Such an obliteration of temporality negates (personal) history and memory as memory. "Those who cannot remember the past," says Santayana, "are condemned to repeat it." And *Beloved* re-lives her past by returning, by being "reborn" into the world but not into a substantial self.⁷²

Ella expresses her opinion regarding *Beloved*’s presence: “As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place [...] Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion.” (257) Her displeasure at *Beloved*’s material presence shows the necessity of having a boundary between past and present in order to live a viable life. At the end of the novel, this fact is acknowledged by Paul D who says: “‘Sethe,’ he says, ‘me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow,’” (273) and hints at the future closure of the characters.

⁷² Rimmon-Kenan, “Narration, Doubt, Retrieval,” p. 114. This timelessness *Beloved* feels contributes to her lack of personal history which makes her consumption of other people’s narratives to gain individuality necessary.

3. 1. 3. Circularity

Circularity is another form of narrative fragmentation that is omnipresent in the novel. The very premise of *Beloved*, the reincarnation of the deceased daughter, is a repetition which makes it part of this circular pattern.⁷³ The repetitive structures and the parallels in the novel, like each part starting with “124 was” + adjective, the retellings of Denver’s birth or Beloved’s reappearance, the recurrence of some images, such as the chokecherry tree, the tobacco tin, or the milk, or the repeated fragment of dialogue between Paul D and Sethe which opens and closes the novel (““You looking good./ ‘Devil's confusion.’” 7 and 271), are all part of this pattern as well.

This is also the main motive of the climax of the first part of the novel. In the scene where Paul D confronts Sethe about the events that happened eighteen years prior, Sethe’s movements reflect her discourse: “Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That 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) Krumholz explains the reason behind Sethe’s movement: “Sethe's spinning motion around the room, around her subject, describes the necessity for approaching the unutterably painful history of slavery through oblique, fragmented, and personal glimpses of the past.”⁷⁴ The physical circling is a reflection of the mental gymnastics Sethe constantly makes to avoid facing her past.

This avoidance of the past is present throughout the novel, as Morrison explains: “The shared effort to avoid imagining slave life as lived from their own point of view became the subtheme, the structure of the work.”⁷⁵ As such, circularity is a strategy used throughout the novel. According to Sale,

This process of retelling describes the outermost circling paths of a deepening and narrowing spiral that is the form of the novel. Each of these circling paths is demarcated by the peeling away of emotional defenses to reveal an individual character's remembered story about the infanticide or events leading up to it.⁷⁶

⁷³ Philip Page, “Circularity in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1992, p. 34.

⁷⁴ Krumholz, “The Ghosts of Slavery,” p. 406

⁷⁵ Morrison, “On *Beloved*,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 280.

⁷⁶ Maggie Sale, “Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Traditions and *Beloved*,” *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1992, p. 45.

Indeed, the facts were given from the beginning. The first chapter built the foundations the rest of the novel is based upon: Baby Suggs' despair is shown, as well as Denver's isolation, Sethe's too thick love ("No more powerful than the way I loved her" 4), and Beloved's death ("the baby's fury at having its throat cut" 5). And yet, despite having that information, the reader does not know much and progressively discovers along with the characters the circumstances behind them.

Finally, Davis also points out the link between narrative circles and slavery: "circles are also laden with ominous symbolism in an African American context, since they recall the circles of iron (and nooses) surrounding the necks of slaves, particularly the 'neck jewelry' that Paul D was forced to wear,"⁷⁷ which is also mentioned in Beloved's point of view: "the iron circle... around our neck" (212).

3. 2. Orality in *Beloved*

As stated in 3.1.3, the novel is based on the way characters gradually open up to each other to unfurl secrets that were previously tightly held onto. As a consequence, speech, be it dialogues, monologues, direct or indirect, internal or not, has a prominent role in *Beloved*. Morrison says: "I wanted the sound to be something I felt was spoken and more oral and less print."⁷⁸ So, orality is also a major aesthetic strategy used by the author on top of being a narrative one. It can be seen in the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and the call-and-response patterns, and it serves the author's political agenda with the creation of a counter-discourse.

⁷⁷ Davis, "Postmodern Blackness," p. 255.

⁷⁸ Kay Bonetti, *Interview with Toni Morrison*, American Audio Prose Library, 1983, p. 89.

3. 2. 1. African American English

Sixo, one of the Sweet Home men, presented as being the most clever, allows Morrison to start a conversation on language, its place in the creation of hegemonic discourse, and how Black people can get freed from it.

After the arrival of Schoolteacher at Sweet Home, the slaves' condition considerably worsened. Among other negative changes was the fact that they no longer got fed enough, nor did they have the right to complete their diet on their own by hunting, which led them to start stealing food. After getting caught red-handed by Schoolteacher on one such occasion, Sixo starts arguing and uses White people's logic to justify his actions. The quick and witty back and forth ends with Sixo's verbal victory immediately followed by a beating: "Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined." (174). After that, Sixo "stopped speaking English because there was no future in it." (26)

Sixo questions and denounces the use of the English language, the fact that the language of the oppressor has been imposed upon the enslaved and oppressed. First used to dehumanize Black people and justify slavery, then to silence Black people and prevent them from communicating between themselves, even when a Black person learns the rules of their game, they can arbitrarily disqualify that person or change the rules. Through Sixo's decision to stop speaking altogether instead of speaking a language that reinforced the hegemony between Black and White people, Morrison shows the importance of language in power dynamics.

"I made the ink, Paul D" (243) Sethe laments the role she has played in the creation of the dominant discourse, in this case written and not spoken, by making the ink Schoolteacher used to classify her traits, which stands for providing the means necessary to her oppressors and show the indirect participation of the slaves in the dehumanizing and hegemonic discourse. By rejecting the English language, Sixo thus refuses to be part of this system.

However, Sixo's mutism in his refusal to speak a language that has been imposed upon him, while a powerful sign of defiance, means that he is isolated and unable to express himself at all. Even if the alternative would have only been the use of one of the tools turned against Black people, his radical decision can still be questionable: by deciding to remain silent, does he not act according to White people's wishes to try to silence Black people?

The use of the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) can then be a solution, albeit an imperfect one. This version of the English language illustrates the slaves' tenacity and creativity: forced to forget their original African language, they take and change what little they have at their disposal (here, English, which is the language of the oppressor) and make it their own by changing it and adding to it.

African American Vernacular English is primarily an oral language, with no set rules, which makes its rendition in written English difficult. When comparing *Beloved* to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* for example, it is obvious that writers can use very unique styles and techniques to put AAVE on paper, but they often share some frequently met characteristics. The following passage, arbitrarily chosen in order to study Morrison's depiction of AAVE, is the beginning of Stamp Paid's direct speech explaining to Paul D the events that led to Sethe killing her daughter.

They open to the sun, but not the birds, 'cause snakes {ø} down in there and the birds know it, so they just grow—fat and sweet—with nobody to bother *em* 'cept me because *don't nobody* go in that piece of water but me and *ain't* too many legs willing to glide down that bank to get them. Me neither. But I was willing that day. Somehow or 'nother I was willing. And they whipped me, I'm telling you. Tore me up. But I filled two buckets anyhow. And took *em* over to Baby Suggs' house. (145, italicized by me)

Unlike Walker, whose depiction of AAVE was very stylized and who took liberties to somewhat render its particular pronunciations (for example, “ast” instead of “ask”), Morrison's approach is more subtle while still making this variety of language recognizable. Morrison does not play much with the spelling of words to reflect their pronunciation and mostly limits herself to removing reduced vowels or syllables in the beginning of words (“nother” instead of “another,” “ ‘cept” instead of “except,” “ ‘cause” instead of “because”, and “em” instead of “them”), the use of the AAVE alternative for “isn't” “ain't”, and some AAVE grammatical changes, like the omission of “be” (“snakes {ø} down in there” instead of “there were snakes”) or the use of a double negation (“don't nobody”).

By claiming a variety of language as their own, slaves have at their disposal a tool that is necessary to build a counter-narrative. It gives them a manner of saying things, a how, that will be completed by the content of their counter-discourse, their what.

3. 2. 2. Call and Response

Call and response is an African American oral tradition originating from African cultures, and kept and adapted in the United States, or what would later become the United States, by slaves who worked in plantations. It is a communal practice, “a spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which speaker’s statements are punctuated by responses from the listener.”⁷⁹ Sale explains the importance of call and response as such:

these patterns both value improvisation and demand that new meanings be created for each particular moment. The valuing of these characteristics suggests that importance lies not only in what is said, but also in how it is said. The assumption is that a story will be repeated and will change with every telling, and that the success of the telling, and so of the particular story, resides not so much in its similarity to the original as in its individual nuances and its ability to involve others.⁸⁰

On a large scale, antiphony can be seen in *Beloved*’s circular narrative structure. A very telling example is the scene where Denver tells the story of her birth to Beloved:

Denver was seeing it now and feeling it--through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved. [...] Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it. (78)

Denver has obviously not seen her own birth, so the story she tells Beloved is only built upon what her mother told her and her own imagination. Unlike the times where she was the one listening to her mother, when she has the opportunity to tell the story Denver can be an active part of it. The details she adds may not be factually accurate, yet they are no less relevant as they represent her perception of the events and what is true for her as is insisted

⁷⁹ Janice D. Hamlet, “Word! The African American Oral Tradition and Its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture,” *Black History Bulletin*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2011, p. 28.

⁸⁰ Sale, “Call and Response,” p. 42.

upon with the repetition of the adverb “really”. It is only by adding her own spin to the story that it can be brought to life, as is shown with the body images: “giving blood ... and a heartbeat.”

Antiphonic strategies are present in Morrison’s relationship with her readers as well. Indeed, the author declared: “I want my fiction to urge the reader into active participation in the nonnarrative, nonliterary experience of the text, which makes it difficult for the reader to confine himself to a cool and distant acceptance of data.”⁸¹ This goes back to what was mentioned in 3.1.1, the gaps in the narrative which prompted the reader to be actively involved in the story. Because Morrison is intent on having her readership participate in the creative process, she also avoids giving any moral judgment to Sethe’s actions. While characters within the story react according to their own moral compass and values, the narrative strategies used in telling the story, like circularity, and the emphasis on Sethe’s point of view and motives let the reader enough space to make a judgment of his own after reflecting upon the story and arriving to the conclusion they want to based off of their personal interpretation.

The relationship the author creates with her reader aims to tackle social problems she is concerned with. The United States’ uneasiness concerning the dark spot of slavery in the national history, especially true in the 80s when *Beloved* was being written, and the guilt clouding rational thinking about the subject and preventing people from coming to terms with the past is similar to the characters’ behavior regarding their personal traumas. The personal implication Morrison expects from her readers and “this call for communal response [are] part of the contemporary healing process that this text is involved in.”⁸² Just as *Beloved* forces characters to properly cope with their past, *Beloved* then forces the reader to confront a particularly difficult part of history, which is slavery.

3. 2. 3. Counter narrative

Morrison’s oral strategies, based on call-and-response strategies, allow her to create a counter-narrative to the dominant white male discourse. Her awareness of the fact that “They [Black people] are living in a society and a system in which the conquerors write the narrative of their lives. They are spoken of and written about — objects of history, not

⁸¹ Morrison, “Memory, Creation, and Fiction,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 321.

⁸² Sale, “Call and Response,” p. 44.

subjects within it,”⁸³ pushes her to reject the grand narrative and give the microphone to people who did not have the right to talk and express themselves before. As Davis says, “Morrison attempts to redefine history as an amalgamation of local narratives, as a jumble of personal as well as publicly recorded triumphs and tragedies.”⁸⁴ This new definition of history is in line with “the poststructuralist critique of the idea of a single totalizing Truth or History.”⁸⁵

In addition, Henderson explains that:

In speaking, that is, in storytelling, Sethe is able to construct an alternate text of black womanhood. This power to fashion a counternarrative, thereby rejecting the definitions imposed by the dominant other(s) finally provides Sethe with a self — a past, present, and future.⁸⁶

Orality thus allows the focus to be on the characters’ individual stories. Neither the very problematic White American centered, where Sethe’s/Margaret Garner’s story is manipulated to justify slavery, nor the idealized Black version, where Sethe/Garner is presented as a hero and martyr who made the greatest sacrifice to protect her children, of history is accepted. By giving voice to Black characters and focusing on small-scale stories, Morrison creates a (hi)story where subjective experience is paramount. Sale states that “*Beloved* insists on a flexibility among perspectives that rhetorically challenges both traditional and revisionist conceptions of history that are presented through linear arguments.”⁸⁷

In Morrison’s opinion, the dry, factual, and allegedly historically accurate representation is not necessarily a good nor a true one. Personal narratives, with their biases, confusion, and lack of objectivity still have legitimacy and value. Reality as a succession of facts and events is not that important if it does not match the experiences of those living it. “In contrast to master versions of history, which erroneously present themselves as independent of their makers and so of any particular perspective, the history created in *Beloved* both emphasizes the importance of perspective and requires the articulation of

⁸³ Morrison, “Rememory,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 318.

⁸⁴ Davis, “Postmodern Blackness,” p. 246.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Henderson, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” p. 77.

⁸⁷ Sale, “Call and Response,” p. 48.

multiple perspectives”⁸⁸ and “life of a former slave might be more historically ‘real’ than actual documents, which were often written from the perspective of the dominant culture.”⁸⁹

The oral quality of the novel is thus used by the author to denounce and revisit Black people’s place in White people’s discourse. Indeed, relegated to the role of object in White discourse, rendered voiceless by the imposed use of the English language instead of their native languages, Black people’s perspectives have long been ignored or shaped to fit different agendas. Morrison changes that by letting Black people speak a language of their choice in order to tell their stories and “to raise ‘real’ or authentic African American history in its [master historical narratives’] place.”⁹⁰

3. 3. Musicality in *Beloved*

Characters in *Beloved* are often shown singing different tunes, like Sethe’s lullaby for her children, Paul D’s work songs or blues tunes, Baby Suggs’ Clearing ritual, and Amy Denver’s song when taking care of Sethe. Music is an integral part of the characters’ lives and seems almost necessary, as is suggested by Paul D’s comment “After Alfred he had shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing” (40) where singing is put at the same level as his other basic needs. The different musical styles mentioned, blues, jazz, gospel, and even European music, in Amy’s song, give a taste of the wide range of African American musical culture. About the insertion of Eugene Field’s poem ‘Lady Button Eyes’ sung by Amy Denver, which might initially seem out of place in a novel so concerned about Black art in general and here about Black music in particular, Eckstein writes:

⁸⁸ Sale, “Call and Response,” p. 42.

⁸⁹ Davis, “Postmodern Blackness,” p. 248.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 245.

Jazz, Morrison seems to acknowledge here, is not ... an autochthonously black form of art. While jazz resists any clear-cut definition, it seems safe to say that it first came into being in the contact zones of the Americas, and developed from certain 18th - and 19th- century forerunners.⁹¹

However, music in this book is far more than the inclusion of isolated tunes. In fact, Morrison explains her intentions to “faithfully ... reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture” and how she makes:

conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice that upholds tradition and communal values and that also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions.⁹²

The novel’s major themes, the individual yet shared pain that can be traced back to slavery, are musical. Sherley A. Williams explains that “The particularized, individual experience rooted in a common reality is the primary thematic characteristic of all blues songs no matter what their structure.”⁹³ Additionally, “As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.”⁹⁴ Inspired by the story of a real former slave, aiming to create a fictionalized yet no less real version of African American experiences, *Beloved*’s themes perfectly correspond to the definition of blues. The use of *Beloved*, the reincarnated daughter, is another part of it:

In the highly ‘musicalized’ black oral tradition, the ‘spirit child’ who returns after its death to haunt its parents is a core element. It features prominently in West African, particularly Yoruba, mythologies; but also in the African American oral tradition a ghost might occasionally appear among the living.⁹⁵

Elements that have been previously analyzed can also be seen in this light as being part of Morrison’s musical inspirations and aspirations. For instance, call-and-response which

⁹¹ Lars Eckstein, “A Love Supreme: Jazzthetic Strategies in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *African American Review*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2006, p. 275.

⁹² Morrison, “Memory, Creation, and Fiction,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 324.

⁹³ Sherley A. Williams, “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry,” *Chants of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, ed. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, University of Illinois Press, 1979, pp. 127.

⁹⁴ Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues,” p. 79.

⁹⁵ Eckstein, “A Love Supreme,” p. 274.

leads to communal experiences is also part of “black music [which] fundamentally rel[ies] on the antiphonic dynamics between the crowd and musicians.”⁹⁶ The gaps in the narrative that require the reader’s contribution and personal involvement are inspired by jazz music. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison remarked: “Classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. And it agitates you.... I want my books to be like that.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, the fragmented narrative, dotted with recurring motives – such as the chokecherry tree, the tobacco tin heart, the color red, or the milk – sometimes with variations – like the beginning line of each part being “124 was” + adjective – and tied together with circular patterns are all structural elements that can be found in jazz as well.⁹⁸

On a smaller scale, some scenes can feel like a written performance, like the final chapters of part 2 which are from the points of view of Beloved, Denver, and Sethe and are reminiscent of a jam session which, as explained by Hall, is a part in which musicians work together to create a unique performance.⁹⁹ After a succession of solos, most often improvised, by participating musicians who take elements from the previous performer and add to it in their part in order to best them, the session ends with “musicians meshing their solo efforts in what can be, to the uninitiated a complex cacophony of sound.”¹⁰⁰

Those chapters from the three women’s points of view are all free indirect speech where each of the three takes turns to share their experiences and life stories. While initially each part was rather distinguishable from the others, they echoed each other and seamlessly switched from one another in “A process of interchange that is very musical in form, the theme-and-variation sort of movement so central to the art of jazz.”¹⁰¹ By the end, what had started as voices echoing each other merged into one both with the syntax, or lack thereof as there were no punctuation marks by the end of the passage, or with the content, the last lines being a repetition of “You are mine,” (197) which can seem a “complex cacophony of sound” indeed.

⁹⁶ Eckstein, “A Love Supreme,” p. 273.

⁹⁷ Nellie McKay and Toni Morrison, “An Interview with Toni Morrison,” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1983, p. 429.

⁹⁸ Hall, “Beyond the ‘Literary Habit,’” p. 90.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 90.

If the scale is even more reduced, specific patterns of repetitions with variation, which are part of the improvisational aspect of jazz, can be found in isolated scenes. For instance, the scene depicting Sethe and Halle being intimate for the first time contains the following: “How loose the silk. How jailed down the juice. ... How loose the silk. How quick the jailed-up flavor ran free. ... How loose the silk. How fine and loose and free.” (27-8) The larger passage interspersed with those lines have a particularly strong rhythm and lyricism that compliments the sensuality of the scene. The evolution from “jailed down” to “loose and free” also reminds Morrison’s themes of mutual support leading to freedom and a better self.

In addition, the musicality of the text contributes to Morrison’s engaged art. Eckstein explains that

music must not only be understood as a mere aesthetic artifact, but as a cultural capital that is appropriated or rejected by individuals and groups for diverse reasons [...]. As such, it plays an important part in individual or collective processes of identity formation, and it interacts closely with categories of gender, class, and, last but not least, ethnicity.¹⁰²

The relationship that Morrison created with the reader, discussed in 3.1., which is inspired by jazz performances’ interactive nature, turns *Beloved* into a performed, and not passively read, text, and “because a performed text is shared, it is unable to be claimed as any one individual's private property.”¹⁰³ The performative nature of *Beloved* consolidates the freedom of the characters and of the text, their right to exist outside of White control.

3. 4. Aurality in *Beloved*

To finish with, encompassing musicality and orality, is the aural quality of the work of Morrison, who makes active “efforts to make aural literature-A-U-R-A-L-work because I do hear it.”¹⁰⁴ The orality concerns what is spoken whereas aurality what is heard, the latter thus is more general and englobes both orality and musicality with additional aspects that are analyzed in the following part.

¹⁰² Eckstein, “A Love Supreme,” p. 273.

¹⁰³ Wolfe, “Ten Minutes for Seven Letters,” p. 267.

¹⁰⁴ “Interview with Toni Morrison,” qtd. in Rodrigues, “The Telling of ‘Beloved,’” p. 168.

First, there is a connection between sound and pain which Scarry explains: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”¹⁰⁵ Wordless expressions of pain, cries and sobs, screams and hollers, groans and grunts, all communicate a kind of pain that is endured, be it physical or psychological.

When Sethe feels absolute horror and panic at the sight of Schoolteacher coming to bring her and her children back to Sweet Home, her ability to have constructed thought dissolves entirely

when she [Sethe] saw them [Schoolteacher and his nephews] 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. (150)

In the face of extreme feelings, here terror, language becomes obsolete, as is illustrated by the single disbelieving “No.” becoming a succession of “Nonono” without any space or punctuation. Boudreau states that “the experience of vivid pain dismantles language itself, so that pain results in the impossibility of any intelligible utterance.”¹⁰⁶ Even if Sethe is not experiencing any physical pain in this scene, the effect of Schoolteacher and his nephews’ sight in what she had started to consider a safe space only weeks after being raped and whipped by them must understandably cause immense psychological pain, which results with the same destruction of language as physical pain would cause.

“Paul D thought he was screaming; his mouth was open and there was this loud throat-splitting sound-but it may have been somebody else” (111) This sentence encapsulates everything that has been said about the effect of pain on people. Paul D, then in his iron box at the chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, is probably the one screaming from the fear of drowning in a flood. His fright is exteriorized with a “throat-splitting” scream, yet he is so disconnected from his own body that he is not even certain he is the source of the sound. Pain, fragmenting both body and language, leaves nothing but wordless, but certainly not meaningless, sound behind.

¹⁰⁵ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ Boudreau, “Pain and the Unmaking of Self,” p. 455.

Reed argues that “sound serves as a kind of discourse in the novel, even though it is unarticulated, unformed, and undefined.”¹⁰⁷ For instance, “he [Paul D] didn’t understand the words [Sixo said]. Although it shouldn’t have mattered because he understood the sound: hatred so loose it was juba.” (207) The lack of understandable words does not prevent a form of communication and exchange from happening between Sixo and Paul D during Sixo’s last moments before his death. Sound and intonation, especially stemming from a shared experience, are enough to bridge the gap created by the lack of verbal communication and become a form of discourse.

Sound also has an important cultural value for African Americans. Reed remarks that “Presaging the music of slave culture, utterance is integral to the development of its subsequent African American vernaculars, including work songs, sacred spirituals, and the blues.”¹⁰⁸ Not only is it at the origin of African American forms of expression, but also, as Eckstein states, sound originating from African cultures is historically the predecessor of European expression too.¹⁰⁹ The infamous subversion of the Bible, the following passage “In the beginning there was no word. In the beginning there was the sound and they all knew what sound sounded like” (232) points out the universality of sound “they all knew what sound sounded like” and as well as the larger cultural and historical background African and African American traditions have.

Therefore, Morrison’s aurality is the root of all the other aesthetic strategies she used in her novel. At the same time, aurality is also the result of the combination of orality, musicality, and its own qualities. Hence, it can be interpreted as both source and result of the strategies used in *Beloved*. Its all-encompassing aspect is what makes Morrison’s work distinctive and distinctively African American since, according to Eckstein, “the importance of the black community, the combination of oral and written narrative traditions, and the omnipresence of music are to be seen as the crucial elements of her [Morrison’s] thematic and stylistic approach and the creation of her unique ‘sound’.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Roxanne R. Reed, “The Restorative Power of Sound: A Case for Communal Catharsis in Toni Morrison’s ‘Beloved,’” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2007, p. 57.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Eckstein, “A Love Supreme,” p. 271.

¹¹⁰ Eckstein, *Re-membering the Black Atlantic : on the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*, Rodopi, 2006, p. 179.

Finally, the aural quality of the text is also expressed in the subtlest elements, the choice of words, the inclusion of numerals instead of words in the text,¹¹¹ or the structure of the sentence. For instance, Morrison explains in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” that the second sentence of the book, “Full of a baby’s venom”, could have been a clause dependent on the first one (like “124 was spiteful, full of a baby’s venom.”), yet is separated so that the adjective “full” is the word that is most accentuated. “The point is not to need the adverbs to say how it sounds but to have the sound of it in the sentence, and if it needs a lot of footnotes or editorial remarks or description in order to say how it sounded, then there's something wrong with it.”¹¹²

Unfortunately, despite Morrison’s undoubtedly hard work to render this aural quality which has a fundamental importance in the text, I believe that it can be hard to grasp for an untrained ear or someone unfamiliar with African American modes of expression. When Morrison discusses the aural quality of her books, she states that “the sound of the novel, ... must be *an inner-ear sound* or a *sound just beyond hearing*”¹¹³ When she explains the use of numerals in *Beloved*, she wrote that “there is *something* about numerals that makes them spoken, heard, in this context.”¹¹⁴ In italics, added by myself in those two quotations, are the parts showing how vague this idea can be. It can be deduced from the way she speaks about it, that this inner sound of the text is intuitively heard by the author, yet even the explanations given about it can seem obscure.

Regarding the initial audio recordings of *Beloved*, done by professional narrators whose skills the author acknowledges, Morrison simply and straightforwardly states that “it was wrong.”¹¹⁵ She then imitates the professional narration and follows with her own correct reading, highlighting the differences between what was done and what was intended. This raises the question, if even seasoned professionals who dedicated their careers to giving voice to printed words cannot properly read *Beloved*, how accessible could the text’s aural quality be to a neophyte?

¹¹¹ Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 194.

¹¹² “Interview with Toni Morrison,” qtd. in Rodrigues, p. 168.

¹¹³ Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 194.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ “Toni Morrison talks to Peter Florence,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Hay Festival, 4 Nov. 2014.

To sum up, the structure of the text and its oral, musical, and aural qualities contribute to the creation of a uniquely Black voice to convey a uniquely African American experience. Morrison “simply wanted to write literature that was irrevocably, indisputably black not because its characters were, or because [she] was, but because it took as its creative task and sought as its credentials those recognized and verifiable principles of black art.”¹¹⁶

Showcasing the range and the power of Black art with her work is Morrison’s way of partaking in African American imaginative resistance,¹¹⁷ the use of their art and beauty to fight back against the oppression they suffer from and to show their own agenda.

¹¹⁶ Morrison, “Memory, Creation, and Fiction,” *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 324.

¹¹⁷ “Toni Morrison talks to Peter Florence,” uploaded by Hay Festival.

Conclusion

As the narrator states, “this was not a story to pass on.” (245) Morrison’s ambivalent and complex strategies can be summed up with the ambiguity this statement holds. As many critics pointed out, not to pass on could both mean not to be missed, but also something that must not be told to anyone else.¹¹⁸ These contradictory meanings imply that *Beloved*’s story, which can be interpreted as that of slavery, should both be remembered and moved on from, and illustrates Morrison’s perception of history and historical traumas: as she has also shown with her characters, mainly Sethe, in order to live a fulfilling life one must come to terms with the past, accept it, but also learn to go past it. This statement is also representative of the author’s philosophy that multiple contradictory truths can coexist without undermining the value of any of them, which goes against the widespread thought that there is a single universal truth regarding any matter.

Admitting and exploring the reality of slavery is necessarily painful for a black American, but only by doing so can he or she begin to understand himself or herself and American and Afro-American culture in general. The normal price of the evasion of the fact of slavery is intellectual and spiritual death. Only by grappling with the meaning and legacy of slavery can the imagination, recognizing finally the temporality of the institution, begin to transcend it.¹¹⁹

Thus *Beloved* is a novel of suffering, of pain, but more importantly of how to accept suffering and move past it. Morrison created the ugly and often silenced realities, a text in which not only individual characters, but also a whole community, learn to move on which reflects her philosophy regarding historical trauma, that it must be acknowledged and understood, but that it must not have the power to control the lives of peoples or communities.

The form of the text, in line with the author’s wish to create a purely African American art, is also a way for her to give agency to Black people who had been stripped from their fundamental rights for decades.

¹¹⁸ According to Cambridge Dictionary, “pass something on” means: “to refuse an opportunity or decide not to take part in something” as well as “to tell someone something that another person has told you”

¹¹⁹ Rampersad, qtd in Krumholz, “The Ghost of Slavery,” p. 395.

Additional study can be done in order to analyze how the body is used to create the realities of African American women specifically. Indeed, Sethe's identity crisis, the fact that her individuality is set aside in favor of her role as a mother and her "too thick" love which takes monstrous proportions under the constraints of slavery,¹²⁰ sheds light to the author's intersectional concerns which have been mentioned but not analyzed in this paper.

¹²⁰ Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos. "Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Women's Individuation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1992, p. 58.

Table of Illustrations

Figure 1.....	17
Figure 2 & Figure 3.....	25
Figure 4.....	49

Bibliography

Corpus

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Plume, 1987.

Secondary Sources

Books:

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press, 1998.

Eckstein, Lars. *Re-membering the Black \$*

June, Pamela B.. *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity: The Postmodern, Feminist, and Multiethnic Writings of Toni Morrison, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Gayl Jones, Emma Pérez, Paula Gunn Allen, and Kathy Acker*. Peter Lang, 2010.

Morrison, Toni. *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2019.

Raynaud, Claudine. *Toni Morrison: L'esthétique de la survie*. Belin, 1996.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

Slattery, Dennis Patrick. *The Wounded Body: Remembering the Markings of Flesh*. State University of New York Press, 2000.

Stearns, Marshall W.. *The Story of Jazz*. Oxford University Press, 1967.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017.

Articles:

Barnett, Pamela E. "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*." *PMLA*, vol. 112, no. 3, 1997, pp. 418–27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/462950>.

Bast, Florian. "Reading Red: The Troping of Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Callaloo*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2011, pp. 1069–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41412478>.

- Boudreau, Kristin. "Pain and the Unmaking of Self in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved.'" *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1995, pp. 447–65. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208829>.
- Caesar, Terry Paul. "Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved.'" *Revista de Letras*, vol. 34, 1994, pp. 111–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27666617>.
- Cowan, Donald, and Louise Cowan. "Beloved and the Transforming Power of the Word." *Classic Texts and the Nature of Authority*, Dallas Institute Publications, 1993.
- Davis, Kimberly Chabot. "'Postmodern Blackness': Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the End of History." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 44, no. 2, 1998, pp. 242–60. <https://doi.org/10.2307/441873>.
- Demetrakopoulos, Stephanie A. "Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Women's Individuation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1992, pp. 51–59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042076>.
- Dobbs, Cynthia. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited." *African American Review*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1998, pp. 563–78. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2901237>.
- Eckstein, Lars. "A Love Supreme: Jazzthetic Strategies in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved.'" *African American Review*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2006, pp. 271–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40033715>.
- Ellison, Ralph. "Richard Wright's Blues." *The Antioch Review*, vol. 50, no. 1/2, 1992, pp. 61–74. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4612492>.
- George, Sheldon. "Approaching the 'Thing' of Slavery: A Lacanian Analysis of Toni Morrison's 'Beloved.'" *African American Review*, vol. 45, no. 1/2, 2012, pp. 115–30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23783440>.
- Gutman, Herbert G. "Enslaved Afro-Americans and the 'Protestant Work Ethic.'" *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 60, no. 1, 1975, pp. 65–93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2716796>.
- Hall, Cheryl. "Beyond the 'Literary Habit': Oral Tradition and Jazz in *Beloved*." *MELUS*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1994, pp. 89–95. <https://doi.org/10.2307/467790>.
- Hamlet, Janice D. "Word! The African American Oral Tradition and Its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture." *Black History Bulletin*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2011, pp. 27–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24759732>.
- Heller, Dana. "Reconstructing Kin: Family, History, and Narrative in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved.'" *College Literature*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1994, pp. 105–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112107>.

- Henderson, Mae G. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-memembering the Body as Historical Text." *Comparative American Identities*, Routledge, 1991, pp. 62-86.
- Hock Soon Ng, Andrew. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Space, Architecture, Trauma." *Symploke*, vol. 19, no. 1-2, 2011, pp. 231-45. <https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.19.1-2.0231>.
- Kawash, Samira. "Haunted Houses, Sinking Ships: Race, Architecture, and Identity in *Beloved* and Middle Passage." *The New Centennial Review*, 2001, pp. 67-86.
- Khawaja, Mabel, et al. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *PMLA*, vol. 112, no. 1, 1997, pp. 115-18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/463060>.
- Koolish, Lynda. "'To Be Loved and Cry Shame': A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison's '*Beloved*.'" *MELUS*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2001, pp. 169-95. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3185546>.
- Krumholz, Linda. "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1992, pp. 395-408. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041912>.
- McKay, Nellie, and Toni Morrison. "An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1983, pp. 413-29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208128>.
- Moglen, Helene. "Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's '*Beloved*.'" *Cultural Critique*, no. 24, 1993, pp. 17-40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354128>.
- Page, Philip. "Circularity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1992, pp. 31-39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042074>.
- Perez, Richard. "The Debt of Memory: Reparations, Imagination, and History in Toni Morrison's '*Beloved*.'" *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 1/2, 2014, pp. 190-98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24364922>.
- Reed, Roxanne R. "The Restorative Power of Sound: A Case for Communal Catharsis in Toni Morrison's '*Beloved*.'" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2007, pp. 55-71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20487887>.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. "Narration, Doubt, Retrieval: Toni Morrison's '*Beloved*.'" *Narrative*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1996, pp. 109-23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107077>.
- Rodrigues, Eusebio L. "The Telling of '*Beloved*.'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1991, pp. 153-69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225328>.
- Rothstein, Mervyn. "Toni Morrison, in Her New Novel, Defends Women." *New York Times*, 27 Aug. 1987, p. C17.

- Sale, Maggie. "Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Traditions and *Beloved*." *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1992, pp. 41–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042075>.
- Schapiro, Barbara. "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1991, pp. 194–210. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208361>.
- Schopp, Andrew. "Narrative Control and Subjectivity: Dismantling Safety in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *The Centennial Review*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1995, pp. 355–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23739161>.
- Smith, Amanda. "Toni Morrison." *Publishers Weekly*, 1987, pp. 50-1.
- Spargo, R. Clifton. "Trauma and the Specters of Enslavement in Morrison's *Beloved*." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2002, pp. 113–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029941>.
- Williams, Sherley A. "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry." *Chants of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, ed. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, University of Illinois Press, 1979, pp. 123-35.
- Wolfe, Joanna. "'Ten Minutes for Seven Letters': Song as Key to Narrative Revision in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Narrative*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2004, pp. 263–80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107352>.
- Wyatt, Jean. "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *PMLA*, vol. 108, no. 3, 1993, pp. 474–88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/462616>.

Web Resources:

- "Toni Morrison interview | American Author | Award winning | Mavis on Four | 1988." *YouTube*, uploaded by ThamesTv, 6 Aug. 2019. <https://youtu.be/UAqB1SgVaC4?si=i990qs94hQnCqMa2>
- "RARE Toni Morrison interview on *Beloved* (1987)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Manufacturing Intellect, 19 Aug. 2019. <https://youtu.be/2jxN3oTSD34?si=-dBys1CJtm6ikN55>
- "Toni Morrison on language, evil, and 'the white gaze.'" *YouTube*, uploaded by Cornell University, 18 Mar. 2013. <https://youtu.be/FAs3E1AgNeM?si=KZ9IUUY15oC38KvFb>
- "Toni Morrison on writing *Beloved* (1987 interview)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Fresh Air, 5 May 2023. https://youtu.be/C-SGXvk_bak?si=PyktnFkZtulFIFm_

“Toni Morrison talks to Peter Florence.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Hay Festival, 4 Nov. 2014.

https://youtu.be/vtJFK_HtlQk?si=0BYqz5gaJfjMcqCv

“WATCH: Toni Morrison on capturing a mother's 'compulsion' to nurture in 'Beloved'.”

YouTube, uploaded by PBS NewsHour, 6 Aug. 2019.

<https://youtu.be/pLQ6ipVRfrE?si=E00DWDxv9cLpxxS2>

Seminars:

Keller-Privat, Isabelle. “The World made flesh: experiences in fragility in British travel literature.” *The Traveller's Body in the Literature, Civilization, and Arts of the English-Speaking World*. 12 oct. 2023, Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour, France.

Résumé:

Dans son roman *Beloved*, Toni Morrison crée les réalités socio-culturelles Afro-Américaines, notamment telles qu'elles étaient pendant, et juste après, l'esclavagisme. A travers le corps fragmenté de ses personnages, elle dénonce les horreurs, physiques ou psychologiques, que les personnes Noires ont subies des siècles durant à cause de cette institution. De plus, elle montre que le corps et la narration travaillent en tandem pour créer l'identité individuelle, et que les deux entrent donc en compte dans le processus de déshumanisation puis de guérison des personnes Afro-Américaines.

D'autre part, le corps du texte, dont la fragmentation reflète les objectifs narratifs de l'auteure, est une manifestation littéraire des traditions sonores Afro-Américaine, que ce soit verbales, musicales, ou encore auditives, et est utilisé par l'auteure pour mieux véhiculer ses intérêts politiques.

Mots-Clefs: *Beloved*, Culture Afro-Américaine, Esclavagisme, Corps, Postcolonialisme

Abstract:

In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison creates African American socio-cultural realities, particularly as they were during and right after slavery. Through her characters' fragmented bodies, she denounces the atrocities, physical or psychological, of slavery that Black people experienced because of this institution. Additionally, she shows that the body and the narration work in concert to create individual identities, and that, consequently, both take part in the dehumanization and, later, the healing process of African Americans.

Moreover, the body of the text, the fragmentation of which reflects Morrison's narrative goals, is a literary manifestation of traditional African American sounds, be it oral, musical, or aural, and is used by the author to better convey her political agenda.

Key-Words: *Beloved*, African American Culture, Slavery, Body, Postcolonialism