

“Tracing Rape: The Trauma of Slavery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”

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Toni Morrison’s celebrated 1987 novel *Beloved* elides the representation of sexual assault as a deliberate narratological strategy. In this text, rape is more often mentioned obliquely than portrayed directly, therefore initially appearing to be less prominent an issue. Morrison seeks not to present a comprehensive portrait of the act of rape and its bodily and psychic repercussions, but instead to offer glimpses into the traumatic event as it gradually becomes comprehensible to its survivors. Thus, in *Beloved*, we do not read detailed descriptions of sexual assault. Instead, the allusions concentrate upon the incomprehensibility of the trauma. This narratological strategy is aptly demonstrated by Ella. She describes her experience of having been locked in a room for a year by a rapacious father and son by saying, “You couldn’t think up . . . what them two done to me” (Morrison 119). Ella labels her sexual assaults an abomination, and uses them as a benchmark against which she measures all other abusive behavior.

Indeed, this oblique representation underscores the *raison d’être* of traumatic narrative: to capture a “trace” of the trauma, as the implicit memory of the event is being converted into narrative memory. Petar Ramadanovic writes: “Writing is not a record by virtue of what is remembered in the form of written data *in* it, nor because of who its author is, but because of what is recorded *by* it and gets carried over as a trace. Because of what writing counters, parallels, responds to, repeats, negates, and affirms, even if writing does not mark any event external to itself, but solely itself, we who read and write are marked by what text, writing, and language carry over: an (unremembered) memory” (93, author italics). In my reading of *Beloved*, I will demonstrate how Morrison evokes the trace of rape experienced during slavery and Middle Passage. In utilizing the trace, rather than the multiple graphic details painted by realism, Morrison effectively evokes not only the trauma of the specific individual, but the collective suffering of the larger

community as well. Her presentation of multiple iterations of rape, with victims both female and male, demands that rape be understood as the ultimate signifier of trauma for the black community. Simultaneously, the rapes experienced by the two main characters structure the novel as a recovery text, one that paints both the individual and the communal trauma and recovery from the atrocities of slavery and Middle Passage.

The traces of rape in *Beloved* most often appear in one or two sentences that reveal the existence of the trauma, but offer few other details, as the passage above describing Ella's experience illustrates. These brief sketches encourage the reader to look beyond the information given to imagine more fully the deep suffering of the individual. A description of Sethe's mother offers such an opportunity. Another woman, Nan, tells how she and Sethe's mother "were taken up many times by the crew" during their passage (Morrison 62). The next sentences reveal that Sethe's mother had a child as a result of being "taken up," confirming that these words signify rape. Yet without the subsequent sentences, the meaning of the words "taken up" would be more nebulous; indeed, to a reader unwilling to imagine the evil of gang rape, they could be read as the women simply being moved from the hold of the ship to the deck. As readers, we must imagine the experience for ourselves: that Sethe's mother and Nan were repeatedly used for the sexual gratification of the crew, and that the experience is so horrific that Sethe's mother abandons the resultant child. The dearth of details in this passage also allows this experience of rape to be applied more widely, beyond Sethe's mother and Nan to the scores of other women who were "taken up" during Middle Passage. In demanding that readers actively imagine the depth and breadth of traumatic experience for themselves, the use of the trace also encourages us not to depend upon textual confirmation from Morrison to imagine that rape occurs. Throughout the novel, Morrison employs oblique language to signify rape; and in certain circumstances, as with Nan and Sethe's mother, she affirms as rape what could be read as mere metaphor. In some cases, however, she offers a trace without further detail or verification. The use of both types of narration

encourages metaphorical or oblique constructions to be read more carefully, as they may simultaneously signify real rape.

Such is the case with Sethe, the most prominent of the novel's many sufferers, who bears the physical scars of slavery's terrible violence upon her back. Her description of this assault is straightforward; she tells Paul D very succinctly that one of schoolteacher's nephews beat her while she was pregnant with Denver, injuring her so badly that "her back skin had been dead for years" (Morrison 18). The impetus for this beating, however, is more obscurely written. Sethe repeatedly uses the words "they took my milk" to describe her violation (Morrison 17). Of the act itself, we learn only the fact that the two teenaged white boys hold her down and suck her breast milk. Sethe's husband Halle witnesses the events while hidden in the barn loft, and according to Paul D, "[i]t broke him" (Morrison 69). The theft of Sethe's milk is clearly traumatizing to her, for, as Barbara Schapiro writes, "[s]he feels robbed of her essence, of her most precious substance, which is her maternal milk" (159). Her complete focus upon bringing the milk to her children, who have traveled to Baby Suggs's house ahead of her, to the utter disregard of the pain she suffers during the journey, underscores how Sethe considers her milk to be of greater value than her body itself. Yet this single-minded concentration upon her milk also may be Sethe's way of repressing another trauma – a rape by the white boys, left unnarrated in the text, but the trace of which emerges during her subsequent flight to Ohio and in her panicked violence against her children when schoolteacher and the boys arrive at Baby Suggs's house.

Until this point, Sethe has not experienced the sexual violence so commonly inflicted upon enslaved black women. Left unmolested by the plantation owner, Mr. Garner, Sethe is allowed to choose her husband from the six young men at Sweet Home, who also leave her untouched while she decides. In describing their powerful lust for Sethe, Morrison uses the word "rape," one of the very few instances the word appears in the novel at all. Significantly, it appears only in order to denote its absence; that is,

Morrison notes that Sethe is *not* raped by the Sweet Home men. The presence of rape, then, need not be accompanied by its linguistic signifier; indeed, the absence of the word may instead be an indication of its occurrence, according to Morrison's methodology.

Sethe's fixation upon the theft of her milk diverts attention – hers, and ours as readers – from the other, more typical violence usually inflicted upon black women by white men. Indeed, Halle's reaction of complete mental disintegration seems more indicative of him helplessly witnessing his wife's rape, notwithstanding the horror of the forced suckling. Although Morrison foregrounds the theft of the milk, figuring it as a metaphorical rape – the rape of sacred motherhood – she allows the possibility that Sethe also suffered a real rape, the repercussions of which are too painful for her to admit consciously. Thus she mourns the loss of her milk, rather than the violation of her body, as an attempt to contain her pain. Yet even as she forces the rape into her subconscious, Sethe appears deeply influenced by the experience, as her subsequent actions in Ohio demonstrate. When she realizes that schoolteacher and his nephews have arrived at Baby Suggs's house to take her and the children back to Sweet Home, she kills her daughter so that no “gang of whites [would invade] her daughter's private parts, [soil] her daughter's thighs” (Morrison 251). Sethe believes death to be a kinder alternative than rape; that worse than death is the fact that “anybody white could take your whole self . . . [and] dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up” (Morrison 251). While Sethe's rape is nearly invisible within the text, and may be read as simple metaphor, its power to command her is unmistakable. Indeed, as I explain later, this unnarrated rape commands the narrative arc of the novel itself.

Just as Sethe's rape is obliquely portrayed, the sexual assaults of another primary figure are equally obfuscated, but just as critical to the structure of the novel. In her excellent article, “Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*,” Pamela E. Barnett argues that “Morrison revises the conventional slave narrative by insisting on the

primacy of sexual assault over other experiences of brutality” (420). Significantly, Barnett asserts that this argument holds for both black women *and* men, and she cites Paul D as another traumatized rape victim. Two instances within the text lead Barnett to this conclusion. First, we learn that on the chain gang in Georgia where Paul D was sentenced to work, the prisoners were required to give fellatio upon demand to the guards. The following passage describes his first day there, as he observes the man next to him forced to service a guard: “Convinced he was next, Paul D retched – vomiting up nothing at all. An observing guard smashed his shoulder with the rifle and the engaged one decided to skip the new man for the time being lest his pants and shoes get soiled by nigger puke” (Morrison 108). Again, the events portrayed in the text are not the trauma itself; we see Paul D react to another man’s oral rape, but not him suffering through the same violation. Yet the words “for the time being” demonstrate that his turn ultimately did arrive. Morrison’s narrative technique offers us the briefest glimpse of rape, before it is subsumed by other images of the humiliation and subjugation endured by this man.

Paul D’s second (recorded) experience of sexual assault is not at the hands of white men; instead, it is committed by Beloved, a black woman. Beloved possesses the preternatural power to command Paul D’s actions: she forces him first out of Sethe’s bed, and then out of the house entirely, leaving him to sleep in the shed behind it. She then comes to the shed (ironically, the same shed where she met her death as an infant), and demands that he have sex with her, saying, “You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name” (Morrison 117). Paul D finds himself unable to refuse her, even though he “was convinced he didn’t want to” have intercourse (Morrison 126). These couplings do not represent the fulfillment of a shameful, but insatiable desire for the girl on the part of Paul D; rather, they are an unstoppable event that fills him with “repulsion and personal shame” (Morrison 264). These nocturnal assaults are incomprehensible to him during the daytime: “how [had he] come to be a rag doll – picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his

daughter” (Morrison 126); and he considers the possibility that Beloved “was not a girl, but something in disguise” (Morrison 127). Indeed, Barnett links her to the succubus, “a female demon and nightmare figure that sexually assaults male sleepers and drains them of semen” (418). Yet it is unnecessary to pin down exactly *what* Beloved is; it is enough to know that, in some supernatural way, she effectively rapes Paul D. Barnett notes how Morrison recasts sexual politics in her depiction of these sexual assaults: “By representing a female rapist figure and a male rape victim, Morrison foregrounds race, rather than gender, as the category determining a domination or subjection to rape” (Barnett 419). Race, not gender, makes Paul D and Sethe vulnerable to the trauma of rape; and rape, in turn, signifies the many other atrocities of slavery through which Paul D, Sethe, and “Sixty Million and more” suffered.

Thus the importance of the traces of rape in *Beloved* lies not in the depth of their portrayal, but in the cumulative trauma they reveal. Morrison’s task in this novel is not to document every type of atrocity perpetrated upon black people during slavery. Instead, she meditates upon how this community, and one couple in particular – Sethe and Paul D – will be able to heal their deep psychic wounds. *Beloved* functions as a trauma-recovery novel both through its revelation of profound sexual trauma and in its tracing of a path to recovery, for Sethe and Paul D specifically, and the black community more generally. Sethe’s rape, whether actual or metaphorical, sets in motion the horrific events from which she still has not recovered as the novel opens; similarly, Paul D’s rapes, along with the other terrible violence he has endured, have kept him from forming a life in the present, as he is constantly battling his traumatic past. In figuring rape as *the* traumatic event from which this couple must recover, Morrison further demonstrates how the black community as a whole may heal from the violence and brutality of slavery and *Middle Passage*.

The trajectory of recovery outlined in *Beloved* corresponds to a certain extent with those stories depicting life after rape, drawn using traumatic realism, in rape novels of the

1980s. Because Sethe actively works to repress the rape and infanticide, rather than remember, mourn, and thereby heal, she is trapped by her memories: “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” (Morrison 70). The arrival of Paul D offers a serious challenge to the permanence of Sethe’s suspended life; for within hours of his arrival, his presence had inspired Sethe not only to recite details of her traumatic past, but also to mourn that past: “Maybe this one time she could . . . feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?” (Morrison 18). Such remembrance and mourning would remove the traumatic past from its place of primacy within Sethe’s life, allowing her to heal. Indeed, the greater part of the novel demonstrates how she, and Paul D, struggle through these stages. To this point, Morrison’s recovery plot is not unique, and therefore I will not spend further time outlining its trajectory.

What sets *Beloved* apart from other recovery texts is how Morrison recenters our attention from the individual plight of the trauma victim onto the “overwhelming, alien, amnesiac, and often incomprehensible” characteristics of trauma themselves (Vickroy 1). Less important to Morrison is a demonstration of *how* one may recover; instead, her project is to underscore the simultaneously baffling and menacing nature of trauma, as well as the awesome power it exerts over its victims. To do so, she writes trauma as a character in itself, a corporeal presence, rather than a metaphorical or tropological one, with which the others must battle for their bodily and psychic safety. The largely internal, private experience of recovery thus shifts from a process experienced within an individual body to a struggle undertaken by the larger community. Just as Morrison blurs the boundaries between metaphorical and actual rape, she conflates the metaphorical battle of one woman fighting her demons into a literal confrontation.

Morrison does so by creating tangible equivalents of the psychosomatic symptoms of trauma suffered by Sethe and the larger community. These other-worldly

manifestations underscore the haunting nature of trauma, both its persistence in reminding the survivor what she has lived through, and its power to command her actions in the present. Reminders of the baby girl Sethe killed come in the form of a mirror shattering, tiny handprints appearing on a cake, and a pool of red light undulating in front of a door. Beloved herself *is* the traumatic past in bodily form. Morrison links her not only to the murdered baby, but also to the other experiences of trauma that Sethe, as well as the other community members, lived through during slavery and Middle Passage. Foremost, Beloved is the “crawling already?” baby who longs insatiably for her mother’s presence: “Beloved could not take her eyes off Sethe. . . . Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes” (Morrison 57). She yearns to hear Sethe tell stories of Sweet Home, because she can exist only when the past is remembered. Talking about the past is usually too painful for Sethe, but with Beloved, “she found herself wanting to, liking it” (Morrison 57); for the presence of the girl insinuates that the infanticidal violence never occurred. Once Sethe believes that Beloved is her baby returned to flesh, she thinks she has been freed from the pain of that trauma: “I couldn’t lay down nowhere in peace, back then,” she thinks, recalling her daughter’s death. “Now I can. I can sleep like the drowned, have mercy. She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine” (Morrison 204). Yet these ominous words foreshadow the insatiable pull Beloved exerts over Sethe that nearly ends in her death. Sethe gives up everything – her job, her relationship with Denver – in order to concentrate upon making Beloved happy, but the girl’s desire for her mother’s love and attention cannot be slaked. Even Denver, who first feared that her mother might try to kill Beloved again, comes to realize that Beloved is, instead, literally consuming her mother:

The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleepiness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while

Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it.

And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (Morrison 250)

Because she is living with the embodiment of her traumatic past, Sethe is being smothered; her life revolves entirely around her past. Morrison allows this corporeal figuration of Sethe's pain to highlight the devastation that infanticide, rape, and physical and psychological abuse has wrought upon this woman.

Yet Morrison compounds the significance of this figure by linking her not only to Sethe's murdered daughter, but to the entire traumatic experience of the Middle Passage and slavery. Beloved remembers more than just Sethe's past; she also recalls flashes of life in Africa, the heartbreak of Middle Passage, and details from others' experiences of slavery. As Barnett writes, "The narrative merges Beloved's memory of death with the histories of women who endured the Middle Passage, where the institutionalized rape of enslaved women began" (420). Reflecting the incomprehensibility of trauma, Beloved's narrative in the second section of the novel is filled with seemingly unconnected sensory details and temporal incongruities. We as readers must dig deeply to understand the traces of signification that flit through Beloved's consciousness. Morrison highlights the fragmented state of Beloved's remembrances by portraying her thoughts in a long passage without punctuation; her phrases instead are separated by small gaps of white space. One phrase epitomizes the difficulty of this passage: "how can I say things that are pictures" (Morrison 210). Just as trauma is encoded in the brain as implicit rather than declarative memory, Beloved cannot translate these traces into a comprehensible narrative that could explain what is happening to her. In addition, as a "baby" and a "ghost," Beloved demonstrates significant difficulties with speech. Therefore, we must decipher the traces ourselves, and the resultant portrait is horrifying: bodies are packed together in the hold of a ship so tightly that the people cannot move; corpses lay atop the living, who are so dehydrated that they cannot vomit; the crew comes down to rape the women; dead bodies are stacked unceremoniously on the deck and then pushed

overboard; and the living jump into the ocean to avoid returning to the hold. Morrison's title honors the horrifying death of one child sacrificed upon the altar of slavery, but her dedication evokes the cumulative trauma endured by "Sixty Million and more" whose experiences are virtually untellable (Morrison vii). Paul D's conversation with Stamp Paid also underscores this point. "How much is a nigger supposed to take?" he asks. "All he can," replies Stamp. Paul D's response is a communal scream of pain: "Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?" (Morrison 235).

The answer to this question is as inexplicable as Beloved herself, for Morrison allows the nature of pain and suffering – the essence of trauma, embodied by Beloved – to remain incomprehensible throughout the text. What *is* knowable is the path toward recovery; thus Morrison focuses the end of the novel upon the possibilities of healing and future happiness for the black community, and, in particular, for Sethe and Paul D. It is clear that Sethe will not survive her relationship with Beloved – that is, her struggle with her traumatic past – without help from the larger community and Paul D. Although her neighbors did not understand her actions eighteen years previously and resent her solitary lifestyle as "prideful," they are also determined to save Sethe from Beloved's life-threatening abuse: "the past was something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out" (Morrison 256). In a climactic scene, the neighborhood women gather to confront Sethe and Beloved; and through their intervention, Sethe relives her traumatic past and finally reconciles the painful memories embodied by Beloved. Standing on the porch with the girl, Sethe sees the approach of a white man whose appearance uncannily echoes schoolteacher's, as he is clad in a hat and driving a horse-drawn cart. Although the threat is the same – "he is coming for her best thing" – Sethe chooses a different course of action: she flies at the man with an ice pick in her hand in order to protect her children, rather than directing the violence toward them (Morrison 262). The community closes around Sethe to save her from committing another murder, and Beloved vanishes. Sethe has rescripted her relationship with her

murdered child in this act; for instead of reinforcing her previous violence against the baby girl, she redirects her aggression towards the person who poses the actual threat. Such behavior marks a significant step toward healing from the traumatic events of her past, because she is no longer immersed in her previous actions; and as Beloved is the embodiment of this past, she cannot maintain her claim upon Sethe. Yet, as Barnett notes, “the novel’s conclusion suggests that Beloved will get [the] chance [to return] should the community fail to realize that forgetting, not communal memory, is the condition of traumatic return” (425). Morrison posits that the black community as a whole must attempt to heal from the trauma of slavery and the Middle Passage by remembering and mourning their past. Forgetting or repressing will allow for the painful memories to intrude upon their lives, just as Beloved took human form to invade Sethe’s life.

The end of the novel also emphasizes that happiness may be found in looking toward the future, rather than remaining mired in the past. After Beloved disappears, Sethe becomes immersed in her mourning. Paul D reminds her that there is life beyond their pain: “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (Morrison 273). He steers her away from dwelling on the unanswerable “Why?” of their traumatic past. In a phrasing evocative of Paul D’s own previous question, Sethe refocuses on herself by asking, “Me? Me?” when Paul D tells her she is her own best thing (Morrison 273). Healing allows Sethe to see that she is worthy of love – Paul D’s, and her own.

Morrison’s novel presents the cumulative trauma of slavery and the Middle Passage in prose that is compassionate and yet also unflinching. As readers, we are constantly unsettled by the traces of trauma that suddenly surface, present images of profound violence and suffering, and then disappear just as abruptly. Her portrayal of rape, which epitomizes the many kinds of violence enacted upon women and men during slavery and Middle Passage, exemplifies how traumatic experience may be represented

while also remaining essentially unknowable. It is no accident that Morrison chooses rape to be *the* signifier of the trauma of slavery and Middle Passage. Traces of other types of trauma are omnipresent – the bit in Paul D's mouth is a vivid example – but Morrison prioritizes rape as the comprehensive signifier for all types of violence and brutality. Indeed, as I have demonstrated, Morrison ties the compelling need to recover, for Sethe and Paul D, as well as the entire black community, to the experience of rape. Even as the narrative arc of the recovery plot structures the novel, Morrison underscores the incomprehensible and devastating nature of trauma by literalizing its psychosomatic symptoms. Such attention to trauma itself, rather than the plight of the individual sufferer, offers a truer representation of the traumatic incursion and its repercussions than that offered by other narratological strategies, which seek to decipher the incomprehensible.

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