

Herstory Unwritten: Trauma, Memory, Identity and History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

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I will call them my people,
Which were not my people;
And her beloved,
Which was not beloved.
(Romans 11: 32)

This epigraph to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* could have very well been uttered by her protagonist, Sethe, to account for some of the main contradictions in the novel. This chapter focuses on the ways the author constructs Sethe's identity within – and without – the black community by means of an intricate collage of memories, determined by her past as a black slave but defined by a clearly gendered experience where the issue of motherhood becomes crucial to the development of the novel. Through this revision of a slave narrative, Morrison understands the characters' various tellings of their individual stories as representative of the cultural identity of the black community, made up of partial recollections and fragments of stories, unwritten and even untold by those who suffered under slavery. Individual and collective memory, history and herstory, the real and the supernatural merge in this novel to recover an unacknowledged part of American cultural heritage through the ghost of Beloved, Sethe's murdered daughter, who will return to bring the slave past back to her mother's present.

In "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity", Jan Assman contends that collective knowledge is not so much the result of biology but rather of socialisation and customs (Assman, 1995, p.125). He provides a definition of collective memory, which he calls "communicative memory" and which to my mind characterises Sethe's narrative, since it is

defined by “non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganization” (Assman, 1995, p.126). Sethe continually jumps from past to present and the setting for her stories constantly fluctuates between Kentucky and Ohio, while her role as narrator shifts from first to third person (singular or plural) and even adopts that of listener at times. My reading of the novel will examine the ways in which Sethe’s identity as woman, black, mother and slave is constructed and re-constructed by her remembrance and account of her experience to her revenant daughter. The narrative revealed by this slow and painful stitching together of memories is also inscribed in Sethe’s, her mother’s and her daughter’s body marks, a visible emblem of the past and a meaningful rewriting of herstory. As expressed by Laurie Vickroy, “the body becomes the testing ground of human endurance”, its scars and wounds revealing the effects of traumatic experience (Vickroy, 2002, p.168).

STORY, HISTORY AND SILENCE

“This is not a story to pass on” (Morrison, 1987, p.273). This sentence, repeated again and again in the last two pages of the novel, shows the main contradiction in recovering black people’s history and cultural heritage. *Beloved* is the story of the sufferings of slavery not accounted in history books, which is made perennial through the novel, but which Sethe needs to forget in order to make her life bearable. Sethe’s recollection of her individual experience is regarded by the author as representative of the way Afro-Americans have negotiated the trauma of being forced to leave their original homelands in Africa and their cultural roots, as well as the horror of being separated from relatives and being sold as slaves. In *Black Women’s Writing*, Elaine Jordan argues that Toni Morrison makes her claim for *Beloved* as the only discourse possible between objective historical discourse and the individual or communal subjectivity. The uninhabited silence that remains is filled with her novel, “to make those who are outside go through what it was like to live with those things,

or at least the memory, the record of them” (Jordan, 1993, p.121). As Morrison’s biographers Samuels and Hudson-Weems argue, the author seems to undertake the responsibility for bearing witness to “the interior life of people” who had no opportunity to tell their stories and “filling the blanks that the slave narrative left” so that these stories, we assume, can become part of Afro-American cultural heritage (Samuels and Hudson-Weems, 1990, p.97). Sethe’s memories of her individual experience, then, if recollected and retold, can re-inhabit collective memory and regain their place in American history.

“Sixty million — and more”, the other epitaph in Morrison’s book, anticipates that the book contains more than one story. Changing from oral to written discourse, and shifting from first to third person to omniscient narrator to interior monologue, the narrative is “evocative of an oral literature that shapes and retraces various tellings of the same story” (Peterson, 1997, p.91). The story of Sethe and Paul D Garner, back in time in Sweet Home, Kentucky, is slowly unfolded together with other fragmented stories and memories that complement each other: those of Sethe’s living daughter Denver, her murdered baby Beloved, her lost husband Halle, and her mother-in-law Baby Suggs. Through “many compelling voices and on several time levels”, the novel re-creates and recovers “the historical rape of black American women and . . . the resilient spirit of blacks surviving as a people” (Sumana, 1998, p.118). Beloved, the daughter who died without a name, as Elaine Jordan points out, stands for all those who suffered the horrors of slavery and did not survive to tell their stories:

Beloved tells more than one story . . . releasing possibilities for recovering memories which can be pierced together to make some sort of a history: Paul D Garner’s story as well as Sethe’s, together with the difficulties they have in telling even each other. It is not simply a matter of remembering but a painful labour of research and recovery and communication. Beloved acknowledges stories which are beyond recovery. (Jordan, 1993, pp.117-18)

Although they are partially recovered, Sethe's and Paul D's accounts show that there are stories of sufferings which are beyond calculation or imagination, even beyond what the mind can bear to remember. Both Sethe and Paul D have safely kept these memories from everyone and have struggled to forget them, a mechanism that has helped them to survive and preserve their sanity, although it has also isolated them from their community and therefore prevented their individual stories from becoming part of collective memory. When Paul D considers starting a relationship with Sethe, for instance, he feels ashamed of revealing parts of his past and opening his heart to her for fear of what she might find in it: "he would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be" (Morrison, 1987, p.72). Halle's story, for example, is the story that is always promised throughout the novel but cannot and will never be told.

According to Willis, "in Morrison, everything is historical" (Willis, 1984, p.271); indeed, my contention here is that this novel is able to reconstruct history in a way that history books cannot: as Laurie Vickroy contends, Sethe's narrative fills the gaps omitted by standard history, often "pointing to unhealed wounds that linger in or on the body" (Vickroy, 2002, p.167). Morrison places the reader in a concrete geographical space (124, Bluestone, Cincinnati, Ohio) and a specific historical time (1873), while the characters strangely float "somewhere between an absent past and an absent future" (Peterson, 1997, p.93). While Sweet Home, Kentucky is the past and Cincinnati, Ohio is the present, the house at Bluestone no. 124 functions as a liminal space between past and present, in which the ghost of Beloved encloses its inhabitants. As Elaine Jordan puts it, "Toni Morrison in *Beloved* engages with the significance that the past can have for the present moment" (Jordan, 1993, p.112). Many chapters evidence the attempt and the enormous difficulties involved in bridging the gaps between past and present, emphasising "that oppression for the African exists as one uninterrupted continuum" (Sumana, 1998, p.125). As the catalyst for this effort of recovering

the pieces of a fragmented past, *Beloved* is manifest history; she is history made flesh representing the sufferings of those who did not survive to tell their stories: “*Beloved* is essentially a novel about the vitality and intrusiveness of memory, the memory of racial oppression under slavery . . . This suggests that history is a tangible, visible existent that a community can experience, bump into” (Wisker, 1993, pp.85-86). The novel deals not only with reconstructing the characters’ own memories, but also with remembering fragments of stories by others who never had the chance to voice them. With the aid of the supernatural, the individual experiences of Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother and Denver become articulated and related to each other, thus joining a common heritage. *Beloved*, coming back to her mother’s life now as a young woman, triggers this process of recollection while she also voices the stories of those who are part of Afro-American culture but did not survive to be acknowledged as such.

INDIVIDUAL HERSTORY AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Toni Morrison presumably drew the inspiration for her novel from the account of Margaret Garner’s true story. This episode was recorded in *American Baptist* in 1856 and bore the title “A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed her Child”. It includes an interview with Margaret Garner, who killed her baby daughter and tried to kill her other children to prevent a slave catcher from bringing them back to the plantation after they had run away from him. Similarly, Sethe escaped with her four children from Sweet Home, Kentucky to Cincinnati, Ohio, where her mother-in-law Baby Suggs lived after her son Halle had bought her freedom. When her former master, Schoolteacher, comes to bring them all back to Kentucky, murder is the only alternative she can think of to save her children from the horrors she had lived as a slave. The tragedy that is to take place can be anticipated from the apocalyptic tone in which the scene is described, “When the four horsemen came”:

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

(Morrison, 1987, p.163)

The murder (she attempts to kill all her children but only succeeds in cutting her baby daughter's throat) is indeed violent and terrible, almost incomprehensible, but arguably very few readers would regard it as cruel. As a possible reading of Sethe's reaction, Susan Willis posits that Sethe "internalises her hate for white society and deflects the spontaneous violence away from its real object and towards a piece of herself" (Willis, 1984, p.277). In a system which negates both maternal love and human dignity, Willis contends, murdering one's own children becomes an almost logical act of responsibility, while the use of self-mutilation symbolically represents an act of liberation. Both in this scene and consistently throughout the novel, Sethe defines her children as the best and most precious parts of herself, and therefore understands herself as one with her children. By killing them, as Stephanie Demetrakopoulos explains, Sethe tries "to devour them back into the security of womb / tomb death" where no white man can harm them (Demetrakopoulos, 1992, p.53). Although murdering one's own baby might seem the last thing a mother would do for love, Jean Améry's memories as a survivor from Auschwitz similarly reveal that a seemingly irrational and certainly dangerous outburst of counterviolence paradoxically helps to restore the dignity and the humanity one has been utterly deprived of:

There are situations in life when our body is our entire self and our entire fate. My body when it tensed to strike was my physical and metaphysical dignity . . . physical violence is the sole means for restoring a disjointed personality. I became a person not by subjectively appealing to my abstract humanity but by discovering myself within the given social reality as a rebelling Jew and by realising myself as one. (Améry, 1980, p.4)

By killing her baby rather than allowing it to be devoured by the atrocities of slavery, Sethe attempts to assert her humanity and her daughter's by protecting her from the horrors she has experienced as a slave, as a woman and as a mother. Beloved is, as Gina Wisker points out, “the manifest history of slavery as it enters personal lives and causes brutal, dehumanised actions in self-defence from those who have been denied human rights” (Wisker, 1993, p.86).

As Elaine Jordan likewise puts it, Sethe’s rebellion and escape, as well as her decision to murder her children “is triggered by awareness of being made ‘other than human’, an object of investigation by whites” (Jordan, 1993, p.124). Jordan here refers to Sethe’s memories of her youth in Sweet Home, where Schoolteacher examined the plantation slaves to check which of their features were human and which of them animal. In one passage of the novel, Sethe recalls how Schoolteacher taught his nephews to study the black people through ‘scientific’ methods: while she and her two sons were having their skulls measured, Schoolteacher instructed them to “put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (Morrison, 1987, p.193). Baby Suggs’s sermon of love is also produced by antagonism with whites, as she has also learned the dreadful cost of being othered and dehumanised by virtue of being black, woman and slave. She knows only too well about the brutality of the system that impelled Sethe to kill her baby, since all her children except Halle (some of them the result of rape by white men) were sold and taken away from her. When Halle bought her freedom after sixty years of slavery, Baby Suggs felt suddenly joyful at listening to her heartbeat and discovering ownership of her own body and soul. From then on she developed a strong spiritual dimension that gathered the black community in the outskirts of Cincinnati through a sermon of love created by white hatred and produced in opposition to it. Baby Suggs’s messages during the meetings she organises in the Clearing are inspired by a sense of otherness that has become one of the

principles according to which the black community defines itself: “Love your hands, they do not love them” (Morrison, 1987, p.88). According to Jan Assman’s concept of cultural memory (Assman, 1995, pp.130-32) as awareness of unity and particularity, Baby Suggs seems to personify the sense of identity forged by the black community in Cincinnati, since her discourse clearly shapes that identity through consciousness of the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Close to this concept of identity is the more emotional and affective notion of belonging and the threat that alterity within the group constitutes. As Paul Gilroy asserts, “different people are certainly hated and feared, but the timely antipathy against them is nothing compared to the hatred towards the greater menace of the half-different and the partially familiar” (Gilroy, 2004, p.106). Although Sethe was an acknowledged member of the community before the tragedy occurred, her neighbours failed to warn her on time of Schoolteacher’s arrival because they were envious of Baby Suggs’s happiness and prosperity. After Sethe murdered the baby the community deserted her, partly because of the horror of what had happened and because she showed no remorse, and partly because they were ashamed of the responsibility they shared in the tragedy. Baby Suggs took to her bed and died, while Sethe became isolated in Bluestone no. 124 with her living daughter Denver and the ghost of the daughter she murdered, who scares Sethe’s two sons away.

TRAUMA AND MEMORY: THE LOST MOTHER(S)

According to Susan Willis, and as happens in many of the novels by Toni Morrison, “sexuality converges with history and functions as a register for the experience of change” (Willis, 1984, p.263). The return of Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men, into Sethe’s life brings back the memories of Kentucky and unveils part of the untold history of Halle, which ended up in his death. The sexual and emotional union between Paul D and Sethe challenges

the power of the ghost and threatens to break the isolation in which Sethe and Denver had lived until then, promising a future of family harmony. As the ghost does not succeed in scaring Paul D away as the supernatural presence that inhabits the house, she comes back as the young woman she would have become in order to destroy this union. By having sex with Paul D and forcing him to admit it in front of her mother, she makes his relationship with Sethe impossible.

Again in relation to sexuality, Paul D is regarded by *Beloved* not as a potential stepfather but as a troublesome rival in a Freudian way: the nursing baby she still is demands exclusive attention and complete union with her mother, and her spirit desires nothing less than repossessing her in body and soul. In her sociological and psychoanalytical study *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow attests to the importance of the pre-Oedipal mother-daughter relationship in perpetuating the mothering function (Chodorow, 1978, p.127). Although she bears the appearance of a young adult, the ghost is still a baby in a pre-oedipal stage who desires to merge into oneness with her mother. Deprived of a name, a home and a mother's love, she craves for the mother-daughter mirroring that shapes a woman's identity and which has been denied to women under slavery: "I want to be the two of us . . . She smiles at me and it is my own face smiling. I will not lose her again. She is mine" (Morrison, 1987, pp.213-14). *Beloved's* voracious desire to recover her lost mother and the life she never had is coupled by Sethe's longing to repair her crime and to fulfil as a mother what she could not receive as a daughter.

In "Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", Helene Moglen argues that Morrison tackles questions about the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of a socio-economic, gendered, and racial subject (Moglen, 1993, pp.17-40). The clearly gendered approach of the narrative is reinforced by a strong focus on motherhood as a traumatic experience, while herstory is read and written largely through body marks, as I will

presently illustrate. Besides the obvious fact that all the main characters except Paul D are female, the stories recalled by women in the novel define them not only as black and slave, but most noticeably as woman, mother and daughter. The slaveholding system that dehumanised black women turned the mother-daughter relationship into plain breeding and, as Stephanie Demetrakopoulos asserts, destroyed “the natural cycles of maternal bonding” (Demetrakopoulos, 1992, p.52). Sethe herself remembers her own mother as an absence: as the woman with a mark on her chest and shining earrings whose face she cannot tell, as the distant figure who worked in the fields, or as the disfigured body she could barely recognise after death. While she was being nursed by Nan, another slave, Sethe learned that both women had been repeatedly raped by crew members during the Middle Passage, as well as by other white men. Nan also explained to Sethe that she had been the only child resulting from consensual sex, and that her mother had abandoned (murdered?) all the children born from white men: “without names, she threw them” (Morrison, 1987, p.62). Similarly, Baby Suggs forced herself to refuse feeling any attachment for her children, since all of them but one (Halle) had been sold. When she pleaded with her master to keep her third child, he accepted in exchange for having sex with her for four months. After the child was traded for lumber the following spring, Baby Suggs found herself pregnant with her master’s baby: “That child she could not love and the rest she would not. ‘God take what he would,’ she said. And He did, and He did and He did.” (Morrison, 1987, p.23) Ella delivered the baby that had been born after continual rape by her master and his son when she was a teenager, although she rejected nursing “a hairy white thing” (Morrison, 1987, p.259). Morrison’s focus on the narratives of women under slavery emphasises, as Vickroy has pointed out, that their actions cannot be judged by regular moral standards (Vickroy, 2002, p.181), as characters are confronted with a system that denies them any human dignity. It is this distorted notion of the experience of motherhood as absence, violence, loss and pain that

Sethe attempts to break by murdering Beloved, and the ghost returns precisely to claim her rights as a beloved daughter and be loved as such.

Sethe's gendered experience as a black mother under slavery is significantly rewritten through body marks: her narrative is often triggered by a rereading of the scars the past has left on the women characters' bodies. Laurie Vickroy has aptly noticed that, in *Beloved*, "connection to the painful past is displayed and replayed through the body, even lashed into her [Sethe's] flesh", thus pointing out to the intimate way in which trauma is experienced by the characters (Vickroy, 2002, p.182). She recalls episodes of her life in Sweet Home as she shows the scars resulting from Schoolteacher's brutal whipping, which are described as a chokecherry tree with trunk, branches and leaves (Morrison 1987, 16), while she recognises her murdered daughter by the scar under her chin. Similarly, the marks on the body of Sethe's mother identify her as an African and as a slave, therefore inscribing her, as Jean Wyatt notices, "in a social order that systematically denied the subject position to those it defined as objects of exchange" (Wyatt, 1993, p.478). Once Sethe has discovered her murdered daughter in the young mysterious woman, and in her attempt to be forgiven, she is compelled to recall her past and her childhood, as well as Halle's and Paul D's stories. Her memory is not only the remembrance of her own identity and her African origins, inscribed by the mark in her mother's chest: it is also her personal story of guilt and suffering. Those marks are the history of the horrors of slavery and their legacy, personified in the figure of Beloved and signified by the scar under her chin. As Sethe, Denver and Beloved put all the fragments of their past together, the readers also experience the characters' effort (as well as the pain) involved in reconstructing that past. In her attempt to justify her actions, Sethe engages in an excruciating task of stitching all the bits and pieces of her past and her family history by means of partial recollections and a fragmented narrative, a process that is vital for the survival of the ghost and which slowly leads Sethe to consumption and madness.

As Amy Denver tells Sethe while she is helping her to deliver her daughter, “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (Morrison, 1987, p.35). As in many of Morrison’s novels, coming to grips with individual experience and the reality of slavery is also a step towards liberation. Sethe’s remembrance of a forgotten dialect, her recognition of her mother’s mark and her African origins as well as Beloved’s scar under her chin function as an emblem of the black community and its feeling of racial otherness, of a history which needs to be recovered but which is too painful to be told. Beloved is not only a single victim of slavery but also represents the “sixty million and more” victims mentioned in Morrison’s epitaph that died during the Middle Passage, a significant piece in Afro-American history that is missing. Through fragments of stories by unnamed and undifferentiated narrators who speak with sentences that lack syntax, *Beloved* reproduces a collective loss, the agony of those whose stories were swallowed by the ocean in a cultural limbo between Africa and the unknown. As Stamp Paid overhears Beloved speaking, he significantly recognises “the black and angry dead” in her voice (Morrison, 1987, p.181).

PAIN AND HEALING, REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

Stephanie Demetrakopoulos argues that the novel “examines the death of the maternal in a woman so that her Self might live” (Demetrakopoulos, 1992, p.58). I agree that the novel poses questions about an interesting part of the experience of motherhood as synonymous with suffering and loss of identity: the ghost indeed needs to be exorcised along with the painful memories it has awakened so that Sethe can finally achieve some piece of mind. However, it is Sethe’s other daughter who actually saves her from self-destruction together with the women in the neighbourhood, who act as surrogate mothers on behalf of Baby Suggs. Denver realises that Beloved represents a danger to her mother’s life and resolves to take action, although she finds herself in need of the bonds of family and community. The

burden of Sethe's past and Denver's terror and uncertainty as regards this past have kept both of them in isolation and have therefore denied them their place in the community and in collective memory. With the aid of Baby Suggs' words, she dares to step out beyond her yard and into the neighbourhood that had once ostracised her to procure food for her mother and sister, thus starting the path that initiates her into womanhood. Symbolically abandoning the maternal shelter signified by the house and literally writing herself into the history of her people, she resumes her lessons with Lady Jones and finally succeeds in congregating the community to exorcise the ghost.

In the final scene of the novel, the women in the black neighbourhood gather again, as they used to do while Baby Suggs was alive, to help Sethe get rid of Beloved, as the ghost also represents the memory of their own guilt for what had happened. When a white man comes to pick up Denver and drive her to work, "a cathartic re-enactment of Sethe's original violence" takes place, as Gina Wisker argues (Wisker, 1993, p.120). In her greatly disturbed emotional state, psychologically exhausted and physically wasted, Sethe associates the scene with a reconstruction of the tragedy that had taken place eighteen years before, but this time the violence is directed towards the white man, not towards any of her daughters. As it happened when Schoolteacher tried to take Sethe and the children back to slavery in Sweet Home, her violence bursts out instinctively with the aim of protecting her daughters. Sethe's action now serves to exorcise the ghost of Beloved, thus redeeming her and her neighbours of their burden, and reuniting her with Paul D and with her community.

As Paul Gilroy asserts in *Between Camps*, the term 'identity' provides a means to understanding the relationship between subjective individual experiences and the cultural and historical setting in which these take place: "although identity, understood as a synonym of selfhood, is always particular, it helps to define the extent to which we belong to a specific group, be it racial, ethnic, social, political or national" (Gilroy, 2004. pp.97-99). In this final

part as in the whole novel, identity, memory, history, gender, race and magic are strangely mixed in a story full of contradictions, represented by the figure of the revenant daughter Beloved. The apparition of the ghost, whose death had initially caused Sethe's detachment from the group and its collective self-image, forces her to articulate her experience as part of different communities (black, slave, woman, mother, daughter). Paradoxically, this intricate mixture of confession, anamnesis and storytelling eventually incorporates her individual experience into the cultural heritage of Afro-Americans, herstory being therefore transformed into history.

Linda Krumholz asserts that "history making becomes a healing process for the characters, the readers and the author" (Krumholz, 1992, p.395). Through Sethe's excruciating effort of memory, she becomes reconciled with her past and part of the untold history of slavery is recovered, while the ghost of Beloved disappears forever. Thus in the novel "all the double perspectives . . . are expressed — remembering and forgetting, accusing and embracing, burying and reviving, joy and oppression" (Peach, 1998, p.149). While *Beloved* acknowledges that "This is not a story to pass on", Sethe and Paul D are reunited with the certainty that some memories must be abandoned for the sake of sanity and happiness. In this attempt to construct a different story, a story that is conscious of the past but free from its burden, Paul D tells Sethe "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (Morrison, 1987, p.273). In *Black Women's Writing*, Elaine Jordan provides an interesting reflection on *Beloved* and the revenant daughter's function as an instrument to give significance to the intertwined meanings of memory, story and herstory in the history of black people in the United States: "The question in Morrison's novel is, how can Black people re-inhabit that history, cease to forget without being overwhelmed? The astounding figure she finds for this problem of being too much there and not there at all is Beloved" (Jordan, 1993, p.111).

As Missy Dehn Kubitschek argues, Morrison leaves it to the reader to decide whether this revision of a nineteenth-century slave narrative will result in liberation in the twenty-first century: “Will we pass on it, or will we pass it on?” (1998: 137) The close of the novel, emphasising the sense of absence and presence that pervades the whole novel, suggests that Sethe’s story, as the history of black people under slavery “should neither be forgotten nor repeated” (Peterson, 1997, p.93). *Beloved* is the emblem of that history, stating the need to be remembered, but oppressive and overwhelming at the same time, just like the girl herself: both positive and negative, past and present, beloved and not-beloved. At times incoherent and full of contradictions, Sethe’s slow and excruciating process of putting together memories into narrative is symbolically constructed through the typically gendered method of quilting and evocatively signified by body marks, and thus stands as a unique rewriting of herstory – even when it is too painful to be told or even remembered.

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