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Slavery, Motherhood, and Recurring Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Introduction

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is a neo-slave narrative, a fictional novel set during the last years of American slavery and early Reconstruction. The novel centers Sethe, a Black woman, her daughter Denver, and a mysterious girl named Beloved. The plot unfolds along two temporal and geographic lines. Its main line, the present, occurs in 1873. Sethe and Denver live at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio with Sethe's mother-in-law and mother figure Baby Suggs. One day, Beloved appears here and Sethe takes her in. In the past, accessed by flashbacks from various characters, Sethe was enslaved by the Garners on the Sweet Home Plantation in Kentucky. Here, Sethe married Halle, a fellow slave, and had two sons, a daughter, and became pregnant with Denver just before fleeing to Ohio. These two threads intersect around a gruesome, horrifying example of slavery's traumatic warping of the mother-child bond. When the sadistic plantation overseer appears in Ohio to reclaim the escaped Sethe and her children, she slits her oldest daughter's throat with a handsaw, desperate to avoid her children being reenslaved. It appears the mysterious Beloved is the murdered daughter returned, and Sethe, Beloved and Denver must negotiate her presence as a reminder of the trauma slavery created.

Morrison's novel is an intricate, multi-faceted, historically grounded reckoning with recurring trauma inherent in enslaved motherhood. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind," a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (4). This mental wound is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly" (Caruth 4). Morrison's mothers undergo severe trauma at the hands of the slavery system, not just as slaves but specifically as mothers and daughters. Though *Beloved* coheres

around the most apparent and shocking instance of the traumatic warping of maternal relationships, that of a mother killing her child, the novel spends only a paragraph describing the tragedy. The rest of the novel is spent demonstrating a pattern: myriad traumas had already been inflicted on the Black women involved, as the structure of the slavery system ensured. Though chilling, the culminating trauma inflicted by slavery, infanticide, is a symptom of systematized, recurrent trauma.

For Morrison's mothers, slavery's inherent pressures that twist the mother-child relationship present trauma upon trauma. In their own lives, as well as intergenerationally, these traumas are repeated, almost "as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control" (Caruth 2). Morrison's novel makes clear that because of slavery, Black women have endured not only the initial mental wound of trauma but are fated to wrestle with recurrent mother-child trauma as a series of painful events. Slavery and its ramifications are the agents of Black women's fate, appearing to possess the absolute ability to continue imposing painful events. As will be seen in the conclusion, at the very end of the novel, Morrison gestures toward hope and healing, and in so doing she reveals the limits of slavery's traumatizing power. Morrison upholds Black mothers' agency, noting their ability to rob slavery of its power to continue imposing trauma through acts of courage and community.

Slavery as a Class System and Economically-Motivated Trauma

Morrison's novel vividly illuminates the systemic incentives that ensured the recurring trauma of Black mothers under slavery. American slavery was defined by class hierarchy, which historian E. P. Thompson formulates as a historical phenomenon of relationship, the result of a

group of people who share similar experiences articulating their interests as “us” versus “them.” These class interests are largely determined by the productive relations of each group and are enshrined in cultural systems (Thompson 9-10). The white slave owning class was the dominant group, on top of the hierarchy. Because of the productive relations of this class with the subjugated class, Black slaves, slave owners' class interests involved profiting off the labor of slaves.

The way this occurred centered on land ownership and cotton production. Owning slaves increased the value of land and the capacity for cotton production, so owning slaves and exploiting their labor was integral to the South's economy (Brown). Slave owners, like Morrison's Garners, held a vested financial interest in the labor power of their slaves, whose work growing cotton enabled the slave owners to profit massively off their land. Slave labor became so valuable that slaves began to be unaffordable; the solution was buying young or female slaves (Brown). Slave owners then faced a dilemma, because female slaves, “already beleaguered by a barrage of labor demands,” could also have their “parental role forcibly subordinated to the economic interests of slaveholders” (Barclay). They could produce value by labor or by reproduction, in other words, but could not really labor and mother at the same time. This inherent economic tension traumatized Black mothers and warped the mother-child relationship by alienating mothers from their children. Because this trauma was the result of systemic contradictions, as long as the system endured, the trauma recurred and amplified. Only when the system was abolished could Morrison's mothers begin healing.

The most obvious traumatizing phenomenon resulting from this economic tension was that because of labor demands, enslaved mothers often had no time to attend to their children and grow the bond that develops over time. Barclay points out that “these ‘combined responsibilities

of nurturance and work were a source of constant anxiety as slave mothers tried to do their duty to both their children and their masters.” Bush notes that “Common to all American regimes was the denigration of the enslaved mother and prioritization of her productive role with serious implications for pregnancy, lactation, childrearing” (70). In *Beloved*, Sethe is the example of this condition—as a daughter, and as a mother herself. Sethe barely remembers her mother. When asked by Beloved, Sethe recalls what little she did know: “By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick . . . She never fixed my hair nor nothing. She didn’t even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember. Too far from the line-up, I guess” (Morrison 72). Under pressure to fulfill labor demands, Sethe’s mother could not develop the natural bond between mother and child; Sethe and her mother were both traumatized as the conflicting economic incentives of labor power and reproductive value warped their relationship.

In a fragment of her past at Sweet Home, Sethe recalls how the economic incentives inherent to slavery forced her to repeat the trauma of forced neglect she experienced as a child. This time, Sethe is the mother. She thinks, “if Mrs. Garner didn’t need me right there in the kitchen, I could get a chair and you and me could set out there while I did the vegetables” (Morrison 227). In this instance, ‘you’ refers to her daughter Beloved. Sethe is divided between her labor demands and her children—and labor took priority. She remembers “dashing back and forth between house and quarters—fidgety and frustrated trying to watch over them” (Morrison 263). Clearly, the demands inherent in slavery are interrupting Sethe’s attempts to bond with her children; the system alienates her from her children, traumatizing the next generation. When Beloved shows up at 124, long after Sethe obtained her freedom, the alienation of labor demands presents itself again. As though still reeling from the earlier trauma of being torn from each other

by labor demands, Beloved and Sethe both dread Sethe's departure to work; eventually, Sethe gives up working, soothing her trauma by living out an option unavailable under slavery.

Beloved wishes Sethe did not have to divide her time between work and home. She makes the most out of every second Sethe is not at work: "She rose early in the dark to be there, waiting, in the kitchen when Sethe came down to make fast bread before she left for work . . . She was in the window at two when Sethe returned, or the doorway" (Morrison 68). Beloved goes out of her way to spend more time than she already is with Sethe: she began meeting Sethe on "the porch, its steps, the path, the road, till finally, surrendering to the habit, Beloved began inching down Bluestone Road further and further each day to meet Sethe and walk her back to 124. It was as though every afternoon she doubted anew the older woman's return" (Morrison 68). As though still feeling the effects of labor demands ripping Sethe away from her, Beloved attaches herself to her mother and tries to spend every second that Sethe is not working by her side. For her part, Sethe took to playing games with Beloved, "games [she] loved so well she took to going to work later and later each day until the predictable happened: Sawyer told her not to come back" (Morrison 282). As the trauma of being forced to place labor before motherhood repeats itself even after slavery, as Beloved longs for more and more of her mother's time, Sethe indulges her. Free of slavery, no longer beholden to the contradictory economic incentives of the slave owning class, Sethe chooses to defy labor demands to bond with the daughter she was forced to neglect before.

A less obvious but equally insidious traumatizing phenomenon resulting from slavery's economic incentives was the disruption of breast feeding. As Terry Caesar notes, *Beloved* is "saturated" by the metaphor of a mother's milk (115). Morrison's use of this metaphor is apt, as during the nineteenth century, "women also knew that breastfeeding had become perhaps the

single most important way to demonstrate maternal virtue and dedication” (Doyle 115-16). Enslaved women were largely excluded from participating in the demonstration of maternal virtue through breastfeeding. As Ghasemi explains, because enslaved mothers’ bodies were controlled, they had a harder time taking pride in or forming maternal identity from breastfeeding. This is one more way Black mothers were traumatized under slavery: they were disallowed an important method of constructing maternal identity. Sethe recalls her own mother being prevented from breastfeeding her: “She must of nursed me two or three weeks—that’s the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was” (Morrison 72). Sethe’s mother did not get to signal her identity as a virtuous mother; the slaveholders demanded her body be put to laboring again.

Sethe was alienated from her mother as the breastfeeding bond was broken; in turn, the demands of slavery broke Sethe’s breastfeeding bond with her own children. Sethe explains that she sent her children ahead, had them escape the South and slavery before she could. She says, “I had milk . . . I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn’t stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar” (Morrison 19). Sethe felt immediately the trauma of severing that bond: “All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it” (Morrison 19). Sethe’s desperation signals the traumatizing effect of separating a mother from her breastfeeding child, a reality necessitated by the harsh demands incentivized by slavery’s productive relations.

Upholding the Class System by Traumatic Means

The inequality and contradictions inherent to American slavery meant that the system was unstable. To uphold the class hierarchy and continue to exploit the labor and reproductive value of Black women, slave owners created methods for upholding and sustaining the system; methods that further traumatized Black mothers and their children. Most egregiously, slave owners denied mothers any legal rights to their children, threatening family units and interrupting deep maternal bonds. Barclay points out that enslaved mothers had no ability to protect their children: “enslaved mothers had little say over slaveholders' treatment of their children—particularly regarding labor and punishment.” Worse still was the fact that children “were always vulnerable to the prospect of separation through sale” (Barclay). Because children were often torn from their mothers and sold, and mothers had no legal recourse, some chose to give up on mothering: “some slave mothers who rejected motherhood because of a system that allowed no consistent recognition of them as those children’s mothers” (Osaki 22). Having no guarantee of staying with one’s child, and no guarantee of being able to protect them, places enormous pressures on the relationship between mothers and their children. The result is a warped relationship, and Morrison uses both mother characters to demonstrate this traumatizing phenomenon.

For all of Baby Suggs’ life, “men and women were moved around like checkers” (Morrison 27). To her shock, “nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included children” (Morrison 28). After Sugg’s two daughters, “neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye,” she began to alienate herself from her remaining children. She coupled with a straw boss for four months as a bargain, to keep her third child with her, but that one too was sold. Baby Suggs “could not love” the child she had by the straw boss, and “the rest she would not” (Morrison 28). The cruelty of selling children

away from their mother, and the mother having no legal rights to her children, “prevented women from fully exercising the desire which is rooted in the subject-subject bond between mother and child” (Osaki 27). Having her children ripped from her traumatized Baby Suggs. And in freedom, she is still prevented from a full exercise of the mother-child bond, as she remains alienated from her children.

While at 124, Baby Suggs wonders if this “dark and coming thing” she feels is her last son Halle’s death. She thinks to herself, “No. She had been prepared for that better than she had for his life. The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn’t worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway” (Morrison 163). Baby Suggs, freed from slavery but not from the system’s effects, was thoroughly prepared for her own child’s death. Normal, un-traumatized, un-alienated mothers do not feel this way; certainly, Baby Suggs felt alienated from Halle, and it was because “seven times she had done that: held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own—fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere” (Morrison 163). Losing her children to sales, having no legal right to them and living with the uncertainty of keeping them, alienated Baby Suggs from Halle; the trauma continued to manifest itself in freedom, as her first thought after a foreboding feeling was the loss of another child.

Sethe, by contrast, is relatively lucky. Her children remain with her at Sweet Home, the maternal bond unbroken by sale. However, because Sethe has no control over her children, no legal right to shield them from anything the slaveholder might do, she feels compelled to run away. She remembers thinking about “the thing that woke me up: ‘While the boys is small’” (Morrison 233). Sethe thinks, “they tagged after me the whole day weeding, milking, getting firewood. For now. For now” (Morrison 233). But when they grew a little older, they would

become valuable sources of labor and Sethe would lose all her control over them, the maternal bond subsumed in the economic demands of the slaveholding class. After coming to this realization, Sethe starts thinking about getting away. The plan is for her and her children to run together, but when everything goes wrong, her children escape before she does. Sethe is separated from her children just as surely as if they were sold.

Though Sethe ends up reuniting with them, her daughter Beloved is traumatized by the separation. Beloved resents her mother; she feels Sethe abandoned her. In fragmented, stream of consciousness prose, what Beloved thinks, “Sethe’s is the face that left me You hurt me You left me” (Morrison 252-56). Beloved argues with Sethe, going round and round: she continues to accuse Sethe of abandoning her, “and Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to—that she had to get them out” (Morrison 284). Beloved “wasn’t interested” in Sethe’s explanation, but Sethe tries again: she “pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons” (Morrison 284). Beloved simply “denied it,” continuing to assert that “Sethe never came to her, never said a word to her, never smiled and worst of all never waved goodbye or even looked her way before running away from her” (Morrison 284). In freedom, Beloved’s feelings of abandonment, her trauma from the nature of escape from a system that denied Sethe any rights to her children, alienate Sethe and Beloved.

Another way the slave owning class traumatized Black mothers and their children in efforts to uphold the system was by elevating Black motherhood to the sole support of enslaved families. The slaveholding class “prioritized the mother-child bond and the matrifocal family headed by a dominant matriarchal female as the only viable social relationship on the plantation” (Bush 84). Though the planter class demanded labor, stripped mothers of their rights to their children and locked enslaved mothers out of breastfeeding, they still expected the maternal bond

to sustain the enslaved family and keep it productive. This placed an unnatural strain on the mother-child relationship, traumatizing both and again producing a sense of alienation. Morrison symbolizes how this warping of the mother-child relationship repeats after slavery through Beloved's consuming of Sethe.

While at Sweet Home, baby Beloved had only Sethe; her father Halle was kept busy working, on and off the plantation, and Sethe was the main caretaker. Beloved clung to her mother tightly, the only family she had. Morrison uses fragmentary stream of consciousness to represent Beloved's early childhood under slavery. As a baby, Beloved considers her mother. She thinks, "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too" (Morrison 248). Because the slaveholding class privileged the maternal relationship to the denigration of the paternal, Beloved became extremely attached to her mother; her mother's face is where she wants to be and what she wants to see. Beloved recalls how her mother "took my face away" (Morrison 251). When Sethe sent her children ahead to escape slavery, Beloved was traumatized by separation anxiety. This passage serves as a double representation of trauma: Beloved's personal trauma from separation, and the trauma of countless Black children separated from their mothers by the Middle Passage and sale into slavery.

Beloved's trauma from separating from her mother repeats itself in freedom: Beloved first "wanted Sethe's company for hours to watch the layer of brown leaves waving at them from the bottom of the creek" (Morrison 283). Then Beloved begins to consume Sethe, acting out her trauma-response fantasy of indulged codependency. Beloved first acquires Sethe's personality:

Dressed in Sethe's dresses, she stroked her skin with the palm of her hand. She imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down

to the walk, the way Sethe moved her hands, sighed through her nose, held her head. Sometimes coming upon them making men and women cookies or tacking scraps of cloth on Baby Suggs' old quilt, it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who. (Morrison 283)

Beloved began "lapping devotion like cream" (Morrison 286). By consuming Sethe, Beloved wards off the repeating trauma of separation, the feeling of abandonment. She clearly is still processing the trauma; before Sethe quits her job to satisfy Beloved's desire for devotion, "every afternoon she doubted anew the older woman's return" from work (Morrison 68). By having Sethe spend all day with her, Beloved soothes the infantile trauma of separation she endured to escape slavery. By imitating Sethe, Beloved attempts to become one person, just as she remembered from before the separation: "I am not separate from her" (Morrison 248). Free of the slavery system and its need to uphold class hierarchy through denying legal rights to Black mothers while simultaneously elevating Black motherhood beyond reasonable limits, Beloved and Sethe soothe the trauma of separation from their only family bond by excessive codependency.

Conclusion: Healing through Courage and Community

Because *Beloved* wrestles with the ramifications of a class system that incentivized and necessitated a brutal assault on Black motherhood, trauma abounds throughout the novel, leading up to and away from horrifying infanticide in tragic repetition. Furthermore, because trauma by definition is a mental wound so severe it cannot be understood, much less mended, until it reimposes itself, the novel carries the heavy weight of recurring trauma. It stoops with each painful event imposed by slavery or set in motion by an earlier imposition. Accordingly, one searches for solutions, reads with a quiet hope that perhaps Sethe, Baby Suggs, Denver, Beloved

and the other characters in the story found some way to heal, to finish processing trauma, to break the power of slavery and end the fated repetition. If they can do it, maybe the slaves they represent could have. Maybe people dealing with trauma inflicted by an unjust, racialized class system today can find healing. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth suggests a way of reading hope into Morrison's novel. She writes, "the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand" a "new mode of listening" (9). This new listening requires a recognition of "this plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard" (9). Morrison's Denver demonstrates the healing power of courageously breaking through silent, solitary suffering of recurrent trauma into active speaking, listening, and learning from others in her traumatized community.

Denver received her own maternal trauma as well as her mother's, and her grandmother's. She witnessed the gruesome reaction of her traumatized mother as slavery sought to reimpose its traumatizing pressures. As Denver looked on, her mother slit her sister's throat with a handsaw; she was the baby that Sethe "simply swung . . . toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time," saved from infanticide only by an onlooker (Morrison 175). Denver witnessed the defensive position her mother and grandmother adopted after enduring so much trauma at the hands of the slavery system. She remembered Sethe and Baby Suggs saying things like, "What was more—much more—out there were whitepeople and how could you tell about them? Sethe said the mouth and sometimes the hands. Grandma Baby said there was no defense—they 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" (Morrison 287). Trauma kept Denver in her house, where white people could not hurt her. Even when Sethe and Beloved fell into extreme codependency and Sethe lost her job, even as the family starved,

Denver stood “remembering those conversations and her grandmother’s last and final words” (Morrison 287). Her trauma on full display, “Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn’t leave it” (Morrison 287). Trauma traps Denver in the place where it was inflicted, rooting her to the floor, requiring that she listen to Sethe and Beloved argue about their own maternal traumas, about Sethe abandoning Beloved. As she stands rooted to the porch, Denver is reminded what white people can do in service of the slavery system, experiencing her family’s trauma secondhand: the trauma recurs.

It seems as though Denver will be another victim of slavery’s traumatizing phenomena, another Black woman fated to painfully absorb the mental wound inflicted by the system, repeatedly. That is, until Baby Suggs appears, her grandmother returning from the dead, and laughs. Baby Suggs laughs, and Denver hears her speak: ““You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don’t remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother’s feet, not to speak of her back?” (Morrison 287-288). Denver listens as Baby Suggs lists trauma upon trauma inflicted by white people under the slavery system. If Baby Suggs stopped with listing traumatizing events, it would be but another repetition of trauma, a reinforcement of Denver’s fears. But Baby Suggs did not return to scare Denver, to keep her in the house. In the face of such recurrent trauma, Baby Suggs laughed.

She appears shocked at Denver’s trauma-response paralysis: “Is that why you can’t walk down the steps? My Jesus my” (Morrison 288). Baby Suggs seems shocked at her own failure to share the stories of traumatization with Denver: “I never told you all that?” (Morrison 288). Even so, Baby Suggs does not take the time to share a family history of trauma with Denver. Denver prods her grandmother for more, for a way to move forward even in a world filled with white people: Denver asks, “But you said there was no defense” (Morrison 288). Baby Suggs replies:

“There ain’t” (Morrison 288). Denver pleads for Baby Suggs to give her something that will set her free from the repetition of trauma: “Then what do I do?” (Morrison 288). Baby Suggs answers: “Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on” (Morrison 288). And Denver does. She faces her fear, looking generations of trauma in the face and braving white people anyway.

Morrison, through Baby Suggs and Denver, points toward hope, a way to heal trauma. Trauma, again, is a mental wound “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly” (Caruth 4). Denver’s own trauma looms over her, recurring as if by fate, set in motion by the slavery system. However, Denver can see the trauma her family experienced. She can hear Baby Suggs give many more examples of family trauma. Through communally experiencing trauma, especially as that trauma is intentionally shared in conversation, Denver’s own trauma can become available to her consciousness without recurring in her own life. She can begin to understand her mental wounds, and as she begins to understand them, she can find the courage to assert her agency and move past the cycle of recurring trauma. As Denver heals, she saves her children from taking on her trauma, ensuring that the power of the slavery system to impose recurring trauma is broken for herself and her children. Drawing healing and courage from the communal experience of trauma breaks the power of slavery by empowering a Black daughter, a Black mother-to-be.

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