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As If We Were Alive - Trauma Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*

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14 March 2016

As If We Were Alive - Recovery from Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*

It is impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. The bystander is forced to take sides. It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing The victim, of the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering. (Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 6-7)

“To perceive the object *as such* implies you perceive the object as it is or as it is supposed to be when you are not there So to relate to an object *as such* means to relate to it as if you were dead. That's the condition of truth ... the condition of objectivity” (Jacques Derrida, “As If I Were Dead: An Interview with Jacques Derrida” 216).

Authentically engaged, the works of Toni Morrison provoke the reader, drawing attention to issues and concepts often repressed in our day-to-day lives that demand action, engagement, and remembering from the reader. This paper will analyze Morrison's exploration of contemporary trauma theory, drawing attention both to parallels with clinical theory as well as the unique contributions Morrison makes to the ongoing conversation regarding recovery from trauma. Beyond simply a presentation of characters suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Morrison's texts offer compelling insights into the possibility of recovery from PTSD. This reality is poorly reflected in much of the scholarship on Morrison, with a majority of critical engagement remaining of the level of exploring Morrison's presentation of trauma and traumatized individuals. A vast amount of criticism seems to find itself either enamored with the traumatic violence Morrison presents or so utterly disturbed that the constructive sides of these narratives are woefully under-appreciated. This is seen across the board, whether Ron David's unfortunate view in his *Toni Morrison Explained* that the sexual violence in *The Bluest Eye* detracts from the novel's real point, the violence of white society (David 55-56) or Sheldon

George's stunning "Approaching the *Thing* of Slavery," where an illuminating Lacanian analysis of *Beloved* is employed but stops just short of bringing light on how these concepts might help those actually entrenched in the throes of PTSD.

A profound remarkability of Morrison's work, however, is in her imaginings of the possible routes to recovery from traumatic events and their practical implications, which this analysis aims to explore. In her review of another work engaging Morrison's novels and trauma theory, Martha Cutter writes, "I do not see the necessity of bringing these two discourses together *unless* they illuminate each other" (672). This analysis aims to show the necessity lacking in other analyses of bringing these discourses together because of the incredible illumination Morrison provides on the possibility for recovery from traumatic events. Two of Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* will take the weight of investigation in this analysis, with a focus on the modes of recovery Morrison presents. Morrison does not approach the subject of trauma the way a clinician might, however. The shifting perspectives and fictional narratives she creates provide a subjective, not clinical, view of trauma and recovery. As we will see, though, this is to Morrison's benefit. Taking a cue from Derrida, Morrison approaches the urgent issue of trauma recovery not as if we were dead, but as though we were quite startlingly alive. The conditions of the truths she presents us with are embedded in narrative, in lived, felt experience and story. To provide a roadmap of sorts, an anchor in the vast sea of contemporary Trauma Theory, Judith Herman's seminal *Trauma and Recovery* will be the central lens by which an understanding of trauma and the potential for recovery will be established in a clinical sense, with Morrison's novels providing a narrative expression and exploration of these themes. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* each exemplify the traumatic dangers of a complete internalization of the dominant social ideologies, as well as a need for the community not to "remain neutral" but to act, engage, and remember the traumatic realities that persist in their very midst. In these texts, Morrison's narratives contribute to the discussion of trauma recovery by

presenting the role of community as a necessary and powerful force in establishing the possibility of healing by these three integral collective measures of acting, engaging, and remembering.

We will begin by exploring Morrison's textual presentation of individual trauma and how this trauma relates to the greater community in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. This novel is unique in our selection of her work in that it does not present the recovery of its central character, Pecola, but rather details excruciatingly her unravelling. Though other focal characters seem to access healing from traumatic events, it becomes apparent that this healing is only possible primarily by the aid and engagement of a community in solidarity. Whereas *Beloved*, from about the middle of Morrison's career, has characters recovering from their trauma, *The Bluest Eye* plays a role in understanding Morrison's presentation of recovery from trauma in its central exploration of what occurs in the absence of the elements Morrison might find necessary in the young and vulnerable Pecola Breedlove. For our purposes, by looking first at Pecola we may clearly see emerging in the text what is presented as failing attempts at recovery. The failed attempts made by Pecola to combat her experiences of trauma create a kind of hole in the text, an absence of something so profound and undeniable that its very absence begins to give the reader a sense of what its presence might look like. It is to this absence that we now turn.

Pecola Breedlove, the despised black girl at the center of *The Bluest Eye*, exemplifies attempts at coping mechanisms for the family trauma she faces, though these efforts inevitably fail her. Judith Herman identifies disassociation as a particularly common way victims of child abuse attempt to cope: "Unable to escape or alter the unbearable reality in fact, the child alters it in her mind" (Herman 102). Early in the novel, Pecola prays that God would make her disappear, seeking to disassociate herself from the very body she inhabits. As she whispers into the palms of her hands, she experiences the disappearing of her body, one piece at a time. As she comes closer to her face, it becomes harder: "It was the hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still

and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left” (Morrison 45). Herman notes that the ability to enter trance or dissociative states, like this instance of Pecola and her disappearing body, “is developed to a fine art in children who have been severely punished or abused” (102). Pecola's prayer to dis-member herself from her body shows Herman's insight in startling detail.

The power of the community to aid in healing is equal to the potential of the community to aid in the cause of trauma. Morrison begins *The Bluest Eye* with an excerpt from the Dick and Jane primer many school children are introduced to early in their education. The paragraph primer is repeated three times, first in its original form, then with the punctuation omitted, and finally with both punctuation and spaces between the words omitted. Morrison's creative use of language and the way it is printed gives one the awareness of something insidious about the text, though it is only through the narrative which follows that this disturbing reaction to the primer may be understood. The Dick and Jane primers, primarily used to give children practice reading texts, are not just random assortments of words and phrases; rather, they tell a story, convey a certain narrative. Dick and Jane exist in a family that is whitewashed of any imperfections. This primer children receive by the preceding generation invokes the “nice” mother, the “smiling” of the father, a “pretty” house, and so on (Morrison 3). Jerome Bump, in his article “Racism and Appearance in *The Bluest Eye*,” emphasizes the power of education to form the methods of thinking in children that will determine their behavior and thought-structures in regard to events and concepts (Bump 148). This Dick and Jane primer given to Pecola by her elders works as a story and as an introduction to a certain ideology, indoctrinating children into the ideology at the center of this narrative. The power of the community to shape the narrative a child will believe herself to exist in is remarkable, and from the first page Morrison challenges the reader to

confront the incredible responsibility of the community in the lives of its most vulnerable members.

Along with disassociation, Pecola also tries to make sense of her experiences by constructing a system of justice that, though incredibly flawed, creates meaning of her suffering. Herman writes: “When it is impossible to avoid the reality of abuse, the child must construct some system of meaning that justifies it. Inevitably the child concludes that her innate badness is the cause” (103). In her forward to the novel, Morrison notes that her interest in telling the story of Pecola is exposing “the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident” (Morrison ix). Considering her family, Pecola concludes early in the novel that “[a]s long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people” (45). Again, Herman writes this regarding the psyche of the abused child: “Simply by virtue of her existence on earth, she believes that she has driven the most powerful people in her world to do terrible things” (Herman 105). Thus Pecola itemizes her trauma as a function within a greater equation that, though holding herself largely responsible for her own suffering, at the least helps Pecola retain a sense of mastery or control over her circumstances. This, too, is inadequate in bringing Pecola to recovery.

Pecola's trauma in the novel is generational, many of the dangerous ideas and concepts of the ideology that leads to her unravelling seemingly inherited from her parents. Morrison dedicates two chapters of the book to the formative and cataclysmic moments of Pecola's parents to show the ways in which their experiences as victims of sexual abuse and as minorities in racist environments are handed off and absorbed by Pecola. Herman notes this is not inevitable, but in fact very preventable: “Contrary to the notion of a 'generational cycle of abuse,' however, the great majority of survivors neither abuse nor neglect their children” (Herman 114). Morrison's later novels, as this paper will show, also push against the notion that a generational cycle of trauma is inevitable. Pecola, however, does not receive the aid that might prevent her absorption

of a dangerous ideology. In fact, Pecola's "ugliness," which she identifies as a factor responsible for the hardships she faces within her family network, does not come from herself but is placed upon her by those around her, using her to hone their own egos. Claudia remarks regarding Pecola: "[She was all of] our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all our beauty, which was her's first and which she gave to us We were beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us..." (Morrison 205). Not only does the community possess incredible powers for healing, but also an incredible potential for causing traumatic damage to an individual by its contagious ideologies.

Ultimately, *The Bluest Eye* is bookended with sentiments expressing the culpability of Pecola's community in her unravelling, the clearest signal of what the text presents as a necessity for healthy recovery from traumatic events. Their lack of attention to the vulnerable within their own gates, as it were, brings responsibility upon their shoulders for Pecola's destiny. Claudia's narration at the novel's opening begins: "*Quiet as it's kept...*" (Morrison 5). Evelyn Schreiber notes that even just this seemingly insignificant turn of a phrase begins to point the reader's direction towards the responsibility of the community in Pecola's wellbeing: "Claudia's community monitors the Breedloves through gossip, and the confidential phrase '*Quiet as it's kept*' suggests the community's culpability in the family's demise" (Schreiber 67). As Claudia continues, she mentions the marigold seeds she and her sister planted in the spring that never grew. At first they think themselves responsible, then Claudia notes: "*It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding*" (5). This incident with marigold seeds, a thinly veiled metaphor for Pecola, implicate the community around Pecola as an unyielding earth, a soil unable to provide the necessary sustenance. The end of the novel returns to this idea. Claudia, looking piercingly into the collapsed life of Pecola Breedlove, narrates a passage so remarkable it is of considerable worth to reproduce in its near entirety here:

I talk about how I did *not* plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town The soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, its much, much, much too late. (Morrison 206)

Pecola faces emotional abuse at the hands of her mother and sexual abuse at the hands of her father, yet the final passage of the novel finds a large weight of culpability in the hands of the entire community. Pecola, the ultimate scapegoat, takes on the ugliness of the town (“All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed”) and is offered as a holy sacrifice, a holocaust (“her guilt sanctified us”), outside the city walls (205). The community, by allowing the abuse of Pecola, becomes a guilty party in the unravelling of its most vulnerable member of society.

Claudia, the narrator of a majority of *The Bluest Eye*, does seem to find healing from the traumatic experience of witnessing the unravelling of Pecola by her ability and willingness to craft her experiences into a narrative with the help of her community. Claudia begins the narrative by speaking in the first person plural: “We thought [W]e planted the seeds [M]y sister and I...” (Morrison 5). Though Claudia is speaking with her own voice, from the outset of weaving the narrative she has the support of a community, a network of relationships aiding her in forming the words. Herman writes succinctly on the topic: “It cannot be reiterated too often: *no one can face trauma alone*” (Herman 153). Whereas Pecola's family network failed her, becoming the root cause of much of her trauma, Claudia faces her difficult experiences as a member of a community. This support allows her the ability to remember, to reconstruct the traumatic events for the reader. Herman speaks of the difficulty and immense importance of

remembrance as a key to recovery: “Survivors of atrocity of every age and every culture come to a point in their testimony where all questions are reduced to one, spoken more in bewilderment than in outrage: Why? The answer is beyond human understanding” (Herman 178). Claudia's communal support allows her the freedom to ask this impossible question. Claudia ends her brief introduction to her narrative by resigning, “There is really nothing more to say – except why. But since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*” (Morrison 6). Before even beginning the necessary task of reconstructing and remembering the events, Claudia has already made peace with the reality that the answer to *why* is “beyond human understanding,” and this acceptance paradoxically allows her the freedom to safely investigate and begin to grasp the truth of what happened in her community.

The Bluest Eye, though haunting in its portrayal of the effects of trauma on a vulnerable individual, lacks an explicit exposition in exploring ways the outcome could have been different for its central character of Pecola, including ways the trauma might have been recovered from. Claudia's capacity to integrate the events regarding Pecola and find a sense of recovery from these traumatic incidences, though seen under analysis, takes only secondary focus in the shadow of Pecola's unravelling. This need not be read as a critique of the novel; the purpose of the novel perhaps being simply to express via narrative the experience of the trauma of a poor black girl in a unique situation. In her forward to the novel, though, written after its initial publication, Morrison herself seems to see it as a kind of flaw. She comments on her dissatisfaction with the way she chose to structure the novel, noting that in response to the text “many readers remain touched but not moved” (Morrison xii). To be “touched” is to allow emotional investment with the character of Pecola; to be “moved” is perhaps to allow the text to disturb and prompt response. Morrison's narratives begin to include more explicit imaginings of routes to recovery as her writing continues, as Evelyn Schreiber notes: “Morrison's work progresses from the debilitating cycle of trauma in *The Bluest Eye* to the tentative self-love in *Sula* and its possibility

in *Song of Solomon*” (Schreiber 82). The imaginings of recovery in these novels confront the reader with the possibility of new, healthy ways to interact with traumatic realities. These novels allow space for the reader to not only be touched, but moved. It is to one of these later novels, *Beloved*, that we now turn.

To understand the presentation of recovery in Morrison's *Beloved*, one must first begin to understand the shape of the trauma she describes. *Beloved* focuses on the plight of Sethe, a freed slave, who cut the throat of her unnamed child to prevent the baby from being inducted into the slavery Sethe escaped out of. Paul D, a man enslaved on the same plantation as Sethe who returns to Sethe's new residence, and Denver, Sethe's daughter who still lives with her in the house called 124, also take central focus in the novel. The novel explores traumatizing experiences of many varieties; the horrors of slavery, losing a loved one, and losing a child at the hands of a parent, to identify a few, all play an important role in the narrative. The crux of the novel, though, is the presence of a young character who calls herself “Beloved.” As becomes quickly evident, Beloved is the manifestation of the ghost of the unnamed child Sethe murders to protect from slavery, the tombstone of the child bearing only the single word: Beloved.

Beloved's presence in the novel signals the physical manifestation of trauma that is created when the repression of traumatic events is pushed to the extreme. Bessel van der Kolk, founder of the Trauma Center in Brookline, Massachusetts, writes in *The Body Keeps the Score* about the dimensions of bodily manifestations of repressed trauma, noting that the center of neurosis is a physioneurosis, that “post-traumatic stress isn't 'all in one's head,' as some people have supposed, but has a physiological basis [T]he symptoms have their origin in the entire body's response to the original trauma” (van der Kolk 11). Effects of PTSD, then, are beyond the experience of solely unpleasant feelings, but may often take a very physical, visceral form. Before Beloved's physical entry into the narrative, 124, the house Sethe and Denver inhabit, has a reddish glow at the entryway understood to be the haunting of the murdered child. When Paul

D, entering 124 for the first time, encounters this presence, he exclaims, “Good God What kind of evil you got in here?” to which Sethe answers, “It’s not evil, just sad. Come on. Just step through” (Morrison 10). Paul D is quickly angered by the presence of the reddish haunting when the floorboards begin to shake, and responds by seemingly successfully exorcising the ghost from the house: “God damn it! Hush up! Leave the place alone! She got enough of you!” (Morrison 22). Rather than having removed the traumatic presence, however, Paul D has instead pushed the haunting into a place so repressed that it soon grows into a tangible reality in the physical world, waiting for Paul D, Sethe, and Denver on their return home from the carnival to introduce herself as Beloved. Beloved, as a physical manifestation of repressed trauma, brings into the foreground of the narrative the principle that methods of avoidance, repression, or ignoring not only have no effect on the assuaging of post-traumatic ailments, but in fact are catalysts for the intensification of these symptoms.

The notion of the traumatic event is also investigated in the novel, the temporal fluidity of the novel presenting trauma not as an event removed from the flow of all other events in a sequence, but instead as that which alters and shapes all other experiences and events. Rather than being narrated in a chronological fashion, the novel dips in and out of the present, with Sethe's life in 124 with Beloved, Denver, and Paul D, and the past, with the plantation Sweet Home, Sethe's husband Halle, and her eventual escape. The perspectival focus also shifts multiple times in the novel, with at one point three consecutive chapters each featuring different narrators, one of whom seems to be a child incapable of grammatically correct sentences describing a horrifying portrait of the afterlife. The central traumatic moment of the novel, which is Sethe's cutting the throat of her own child, is in one regard in fact missing from the narrative. Though known to the reader fairly early on, the narrative telling of the moment itself is incredible brisk and easy to overlook. Morrison comments on this in her interview with *The Paris Review*: “It seemed important to me that the action in *Beloved*—the fact of infanticide—be

immediately known, but deferred, unseen. I wanted to give the reader all the information and the consequences surrounding the act, while avoiding engorging myself or the reader with the violence itself” (Schappell). The novel places the moment of Beloved's murder at the center of the narrative, thematically as well as, arguably, structurally, so that the temporal fluidity seems to pivot around this event. It is as though the events of the novel are planets in orbit around the murder of Beloved, except this moment is, in terms of time given in lines of narration, less like a blazing sun and more like a flickering candle. Morrison also employs this method of presentation in her introduction of “the bit” to the reader. The bit was used in slavery as a round ball that would be placed in the mouth and tied around the face of a man or woman. Paul D, during his time at one plantation, experiences this abject horror, yet the narrator never explicitly describes what the bit is to the reader. Morrison explains: “I realized that describing it would never be helpful; that the reader didn’t need to see it so much as feel what it was like” (Schappell). The bit here in many ways acts as a metonym for trauma in a broader context, showing that it is not a specific object or event that becomes the exclusive memory of a traumatic episode, but the ways in which the trauma shapes and distorts all objects following and preceding the specific event. This is evident in the structural temporal fluidity of the novel. For this reason, describing in vivid detail the event or object itself would be misleading to the reader, undercutting the reality of the horrors of *post*-traumatic stress disorder on the subject's experience of past, present, and concept of future.

Before showcasing the crucial catalyst for recovery from trauma in *Beloved*, Morrison first plunges the reader into the depths of failing attempts at healing. When Sethe finally comes to the realization that Beloved is the manifestation of her murdered child, she begins to perceive Beloved as the sacred object to heal her pain, the erasure of her trauma. Sheldon George speaks of this phenomena in his psychoanalytic analysis of *Beloved*, focusing on the psychoanalytic thought of Jacques Lacan. The theoretical framework of Lacan, though often frustratingly

difficult, is helpful in understanding Sethe's posture towards Beloved once she recognizes her identity. Lacan often speaks of "the Real," which, in simplified terms, comes to represent traumatic events or places difficult both to remember or forget, and the "*objet a*," "the fantasy object that promises to guarantee the fullness of an identity that is both individual and communal" (George 115, 117). George uses these ideas to understand the relationship that emerges between Sethe and Beloved:

Beloved comes precisely to embody for Sethe a sublimated representative of the Real, a destructive Thing that Sethe claims as her own 'best thing' (251).

Emerging first as the *objet a* that promises to fulfill Sethe's longing ... Beloved is soon transformed into what Lacan calls after Freud *Das Ding*, or the Thing, the embodiment of the Real, in the presence of which one can experience only ceaseless, unchanging suffering. (118)

Sethe's adoration of her returned child as her *objet a* indeed quickly transforms from ecstatic bliss to an experience of *Das Ding*, the Thing, which brings her ceaseless, unchanging suffering. Sethe's first response to recognizing Beloved as her daughter is to isolate herself and be completely enraptured in the presence of Beloved: "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" (215). Soon after, Sethe's experience becomes treacherous: "The flesh between [Sethe's] forefinger and thumb was thin as china silk and there wasn't a piece of clothing in the house that didn't sag on her" (281). Sethe's isolation becomes more acute, as Sethe's living daughter is pushed out her her life: "[S]he cut Denver out completely" (282). Rather than remember her trauma in a safe, healthy way, Sethe attempts to live in a fantasy where her horrifying experiences never happened; rather than act or engage, Sethe holes herself up alone in her house with a sublimated representative of the Real, of her trauma; rather than seeking the aid of the community, Sethe isolates herself in her house, cutting ties even with the only remaining member of her family she

has a relationship with. As a result, Sethe begins to physically shrink, while Beloved “was getting bigger, plumper by the day” (281). An alternative method of recovery is needed, and, as Morrison will show us, an alternative and effective method is possible.

In order for Sethe and Denver to find healing and achieve a sense of recovery, new connections must be made and empowerment must be found. Herman writes that the core experiences of trauma are disempowerment, seen in Sethe's enslavement to the whims of Beloved, and disconnection, seen in Sethe's isolation from the outside world. Therefore, recovery “is based on the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can only take place in the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (133). The establishment of new connections is courageously undertaken by Denver when she recognizes the horror of the state within 124. In order to do so, however, she must exit the isolation she has lived in her entire life, having spent most of her time secluded within the walls of 124. She must symbolically leave the only world she knows and enter an abyss of unknowns: “She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help” (Morrison 286). Though terrified at first to leave the limits of her known world, Denver slowly begins to feel empowered in the world outside 124, as her first visit to a member of the community results in a steady flow of food left in her front yard to feed Denver, Sethe, and Beloved. This empowerment and establishment of new connections matures Denver, prepares her to confront the trauma her family network is experiencing. Evelyn Schreibner writes: “By leaving the house and entering the community, Denver finds a selfhood These caring contacts have reconstituted her subjectivity” (50). Feeling empowered the more she enters the community, to thank women for food left in her yard or to ask for work, Denver notes, “It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve” (Morrison 297). Denver's newfound empowerment and creation of new relationships is the first step in find a road to recovery in the novel.

With Denver's new empowerment and creation of new connections priming her for the possibility of recovery, the community must now also engage, act, and remember, though this does not initially occur in the course of events. Morrison first shows ways the community fails to engage what is occurring in 124, giving them partial culpability for allowing many of the terrifying events to happen within their neighborhood. Baby Suggs, Sethe's deceased mother-in-law who was once a vibrant member of her community, offering pseudo-church services in the woods behind her house where people would join in dance and song, resigned to a life of bitterness and hopelessness after Sethe's killing of Beloved. In describing how this happened, how the vibrant joy of Baby Suggs became spoiled, the text narrates: “[T]o belong to a community of other free Negroes – to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, to protect and be protected, to feed and be fed – and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance – well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy” (209). The withdrawal of the community from the life of Baby Suggs became the catalyst for the departure of her once vibrant and inspiring personality. In a flashback, Stamp Paid, a longtime friend of Baby Suggs, notes that in her face “indifference lodged where sadness should have been” (209). Baby Suggs, disconnected from her secure attachments, succumbs to a disassociative and numbed state rather than an state of engagement with her reality. Later, when Stamp Paid begins to become aware of something treacherous within 124 with Sethe and Denver, he struggles to overcome his sense of pride and, try as he might, is unable to knock at the door. Used to being unconditionally welcome in the home of anyone in his neighborhood, Stamp Paid cannot bring himself to knock at a closed door, even though he knows terror lies behind it. Morrison writes: “Six times in as many days he abandoned his normal route and tried to knock at 124. But the coldness of the gesture – its sign that he was indeed a stranger at the gate – overwhelmed him. Retracing his steps in the snow, he sighed. Spirit willing, flesh weak” (203). Stamp's refusal to

communally engage the terror in 124, despite his best efforts, indirectly aids in the escalation of the trauma behind the door among Sethe and Denver.

Sethe's relationship with Paul D, though strained by the eventual presence of Beloved, helps carve the way for healing to enter Sethe's life by its status as a relationship capable of communally remembering a shared trauma. Paul D, who lives on the plantation Sweet Home with Sethe and experienced many similar events, is able to bring a sense of solidarity to his relationship with Sethe in 124. Schreiber writes: "The fact that Paul D shares Sethe's story makes it bearable. That their collective past can be passed on to Denver brings the burden of healing into focus" (43). Having been away from Sethe since her escape from Sweet Home, Paul D's re-entry into Sethe's life is the first new established connection Sethe experiences after the death of Baby Suggs. Though things only get worse from Paul D's first appearance in the novel, with the introduction of Beloved and her eventual transformation from Lacan's *objet a* to *Das Ding*, or the Thing, for Sethe, the relationship rekindled with Paul D helps pave the way for the future engagement of the community that will ultimately be the turning point for life inside 124. Again, Schreiber writes on this concept: "Paul D and the community will help Sethe to remember her traumatic past and to learn to live with it in the present. Communal rememory transforms traumatic personal history" (43). This relationship is key for allowing the possibility of remembrance, a task Herman emphasizes as integral for recovery. Indeed, throughout *Beloved* the phrase "re-memory" is often used in narration or by Sethe. This unique presentation of what is on the surface a signifier for the concept of memory or remembering draws attention to the etymology of the word "remember:" to re-member is the opposite of to dis-member. In this sense, remembering is the act of coming together, to be made full instead of incomplete or lacking, to be joined with one's own self and the selfhood of others. It is Paul D's introduction into Sethe's narrative within 124 that first allows this the potential for a communal act of re-memory to take place.

With Denver's newfound self-empowerment and connection with others as well as Sethe's being primed by her relationship with Paul D to communally engage in an act of remembrance, the stage is set for the community to engage the members of 124 and bring their potential for healing, which is the ultimate act that brings recovery in *Beloved*. As aforementioned, Denver's first foray into the world outside her insular life in 124 results in a steady flow of food left in the front yard of her home. These foods are left with slips of papers with names on them, sometimes so Denver might know who to return the dishes to, and others, when the food is simply wrapped in paper or in a bag, just to inform Denver of who within the community is responsible for the gift (Morrison 293). These gifts with names attached encourage Denver to continue to venture out into the world, to find and connect with the vast network of people who all have stepped in to provide food for Denver and her family. Bessel van der Kolk writes: "Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives [S]ocial support is the most powerful protection against becoming overwhelmed by ... trauma" (79). Though this event occurs fairly late in the novel, it should not be downplayed that this is the crucial moment where a new possibility for Denver's life enters her awareness. What van der Kolk rightly declares as the most powerful protection against trauma is the first step towards a new kind of existence for Sethe and Denver. The community has acted and engaged Denver's needs, and thus her familial trauma. Healing can finally begin.

The sheer power of communal remembrance is reflected in the very structure of *Beloved*, as well. Constantly throughout the book the perspective seamlessly shifts from one character to another, from the present to the past and back into the present, often so quickly that even the most astute reader is caught off guard. In part two of the book, the perspective shifts so quickly that three chapters in a row are each narrated by three different characters with differing vantage points on the same events. Just how *The Bluest Eye* begins with Claudia speaking in the first

person plural, *Beloved* is similarly told in the context of community rather than from one God's-eye view of events. This is because, for Morrison, the remembrance of the community rather than just the individual makes all the difference. There is something powerful at the level of the subjective experience Morrison find more pressing and urgent than what might be found on an “objective” plane of narration. Philosopher Thomas Nagel, in his seminal “What is it Like to be a Bat?” writes: “If the subjective character of experience is fully comprehensible only from one point of view, then any shift to greater objectivity – that is, less attachment to a specific viewpoint – does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it” (Nagel 174). One single narrative from an individual, taking Nagel's thoughts into account, takes us farther from the truth of the event rather than closer. To approach certain topics, one viewpoint isn't enough – we must call upon the multitudes, the community, and pray they actively engage and remember to tell their stories. When a community actively engages in the task of remembrance they may come closer to “the real nature of the phenomenon,” they may begin to approach the goal of recovery.

With Denver engaged in the community and the community's willingness to act and engage in her world, the community begins the difficult and tremendous act of remembrance on behalf of Denver and Sethe. This is no small act. Herman writes: “Reconstructing trauma is ambitious work. It requires some slackening of ordinary life demands, some 'tolerance for the state of being ill’” (176). This is on behalf of both the traumatized and the community; both must be willing to enter a state of imbalance, dis-ease, to confront the difficulties that exist within their network of connection. The contemporary literature on the subject is not silent on the incredible power of the community to aid in recovery. Van der Kolk, for instance, writes on the subject of connectivity: “Our culture teaches us to focus on personal uniqueness, but at a deeper level we barely exist as individual organisms. Our brains are built to help us function as members of a tribe” (78). Morrison's *Beloved*, though, seems to suggest this concept in a powerful way

unavailable to scientific prose. *The Bluest Eye* shows us what can happen when a member of a community, or, in van der Kolk's terms, "tribe," is cast off, left at the edge of town, "among the garbage and the sunflowers" (Morrison 206). *Beloved's* narrative has the community trekking directly to the edge of town, where the trauma of Sethe and Denver exists, and faces what lies there. To do so, they must acknowledge what is incredibly uncomfortable to remember. Morrison provides dialogue from unnamed characters, representing a metonym for the community at large, spreading word about the trauma persisting in their neighborhood. Some are skeptical of giving Sethe the help she needs, but ultimately the willingness to act, engage, and remember wins out:

'Guess she had it coming.'

'Nobody got that coming.'

'But, Ella-'

'But nothing. What's fair ain't necessarily right.'

'You can't just up and kill your children.'

'No, and the children can't just up and kill the mama.' (301)

The secret of Sethe's past that was never a secret to anyone in the neighborhood is finally out, and with the support of her neighbors, progress can finally be made. The community need not all even be in agreement about the particulars of the reason for their gathering and communal remembrance. They need not even have a grand plan. When the women gather and head to 124, the text reads: "Some brought what they could have what they believed would work Others brought Christian faith, as sword and shield. Most brought a little of both. They had no idea what they would do once they got there. They just started out" (303). Often all that is required to make a positive change in the life of another is to "just start out" in their direction. We will find it to be the one simple act that begins to bring healing to 124, just as we have seen it to be an act that is woefully missing in the story of Pecola Breedlove.

We must now, having noted the incredible power of the community to be an active agent in trauma recovery, reflect on the limits of the community as well. Trauma cannot be erased. Even the erasure of traumatic memory from the conscious mind is not a certain antidote for PTSD, as any case study of repressed childhood abuse will show. Sethe's attempts to no longer "re-memory" her trauma in the woodshed behind 124 once Beloved is realized to be her daughter results in the horrifying transformation of Beloved into *Das Ding*, a terrifying emblem of the very thing Sethe wishes to forget. Herman writes that healing depends on "the discovery of restorative love in her own life," which is seen in the communal exorcism of Beloved from 124 near the end of the text (Herman 190). But Herman continues: "She will never forget. She will grieve every day. But the time comes when the trauma no longer commands the central place in her life" (195). Can healing from trauma occur? Maybe. Hopefully. Perhaps. Can what's been done become undone? No. This is the narrative of trauma and recovery in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*. The text of *Beloved*, in fact, ends ambiguously, with the ghost of Beloved exorcised but the future of Sethe still open to possibility. After the communal exorcism, Paul D visits Sethe, lying in 124 in the bed Baby Suggs dies in, ready to resign to death. Sethe starts to cry and tells Paul D, "She was my best thing" (321). Seeing that she is still experiencing life as an orbit of planets circling around her trauma, living in the past, Paul D tells her, "[M]e and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow You are your best thing, Sethe. You are" (322). Paul D, building on the power of the community to exorcise Beloved, reaches out to Sethe in an act of restorative love, compelling her to look to the future, to hope, and to see her identity not as what she has done but in who she is now. The answer Sethe gives Paul D, and her last words in the text, are "Me? Me?" (322). Morrison does not present a narrative where communal engagement magically erases and nullifies the traumatic events of the past. Instead, she gives us a narrative that shows the potential, the possibility opened up only when the community acts, engages, and remembers. This most powerful force in recovery is

emphasized in this novel and many of Morrison's others, but there is a limit to its power. Beyond that, we must, just as Paul D begs Sethe to do, hope.

Beloved, perhaps more so than any other of Morrison's texts, when fully engaged demands action and remembrance on behalf of the reader. To approach the text as simply a work of fiction and leave it at that would be a woeful misunderstanding. Morrison explores this issue in *What Moves at the Margin*. She writes: "Therefore the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot. So ... I'm looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it" (72). Her work is not fantastical just for the sake of the fantastic; but, rather, in the case of *Beloved*, is rooted in the very real and truthful trauma of American institutionalized slavery, which even today has a profound and urgent relevance to society. The forward to *The Bluest Eye* also emphasizes its relevance to our present culture. Morrison writes: "Hearing 'civilized' languages debase humans, watching cultural exorcisms debase literature, seeing oneself preserved in the amber of disqualifying metaphors – I can say that my narrative project is as difficult today as it was then" (xiii). This urgency is present even more so, though, in *Beloved*, as before even the first page the engaged reader is forced to confront the realities the text presents. The dedication page for *Beloved* reads: "*Sixty Million and more.*" Morrison has explained that this number is "the best educated guess at the number of black Africans who never even made it into slavery – those who died either as captives in Africa or on slave ships" (Clemons 46). From before even the first page of narrative Morrison is dragging her readers out of the realm of entertaining fiction and into our own current, pregnant, simultaneously horrifying and brilliant world.

To fully engage the novels of Toni Morrison is to engage narratives of trauma, despair, and travesties, as well as hope, potential, and healing. The dedication page to *Beloved* forces the reader to confront the tangible realities the fictional-yet-true narrative is birthed out of. It

would be a tragically shallow reading of Morrison, though, to see her work as engaging exclusively with the horrors of the world, as some seem to have implied. A quick look at much of the criticism and scholarship on Morrison shows an over-emphasis on trauma and a lack of meaningful widespread engagement with recovery. Contrary to this trend, Morrison is not a masochist. Instead, her work approaches the difficult task of engaging harsh realities of the world while also creatively imagining profound ways of recovery and the possibility for healing. Her work rivals that of Van der Kolk and Herman, but she does not approach the subject as a clinician. The condition for the truth Morrison presents us with rests upon the condition that we are alive, that we, just like her characters, are embedded in a narrative both individually and collectively. The engaged reader not only confronts many uncomfortable horrors of this world, but an undeniable insistence that these horrors need not persist, as well. Morrison does this not by objective, clinical comments or overly scholarly remarks, but through the fictional, accessible, and pressingly truthful mode of narrative, as though we were quite startlingly alive. A community that acts, is engaged, and remembers, is a community that opens up the potential for healing. In our present time, the urgency of Morrison's work remains profound.

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