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Milk Enough for All: The African-American Woman's Quest for Identity and Authority in Toni Morrison's "Beloved"

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MILK ENOUGH FOR ALL:
THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY
AND AUTHORITY IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED



A Thesis
Presented to
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts



by
Amy Ghaemmaghami

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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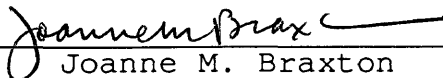


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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the African-American woman's quest for authority and identity in Toni Morrison's novel Beloved.

Chapter One of this study examines the African-American tradition of slave narrative and compares it to Morrison's neo-slave narrative Beloved. It suggests that nineteenth-century African-American slave narratives could neither fully reveal the sexual and racial exploitation of slave women nor the slave women's resistance to this exploitation.

Chapter Two uses the psychoanalytic theories of Nancy Chodorow in order to explore the problems African-American women face in their quest for authority. The preoedipal relationship between Sethe and Beloved is examined as a representation of the slave woman's psychological resistance to the devastating effects of slavery.

Chapter Three suggests that authority and identity can be gained through storytelling. Storytelling becomes the process whereby an African-American woman can claim authority over her own experience.

This study concludes that while the slave woman gains some temporary authority by resisting the power of patriarchal slaveholders, her resistance results in her isolation from both the black and white communities. Storytelling presents an alternative to the isolation from community because it allows the African-American woman to reclaim authority and create an identity within community.

Finally, this study makes the dual claim that the African-American woman's struggle for identity and authority is both represented in and represented by Morrison's Beloved. Through her continuation and revision of the African-American slave narrative tradition, Morrison reclaims the self, text, and history of the African-American woman.

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Chapter 1

Ten years before she wrote Beloved, Toni Morrison discussed slave narratives in an interview with Robert Stepto. She says,

You know, I go sometimes and, just for sustenance, I read those slave narratives--there are sometimes three or four sentences or half a page, each one of which could be developed into an art form, marvelous. Just to figure out how to--you mean to tell me she beat the dogs and the man and pulled stump out of the ground? Who is she, you know? Who is she? It's just incredible. And all of that will surface, it will SURFACE, and my huge joy is thinking that I am in some way part of it. (489)

Beloved is Morrison's attempt at answering the question she posed in the Stepto interview. Who is that slave woman and how did she survive? In the process of answering her questions about the identity of the slave woman, Morrison carves a niche for herself in the literary history of the slave narrative. Morrison succeeds at what the eighteenth and nineteenth century slave narratives dared not try: she creates as her central character a female slave whose "story" focuses not on her victimization and the victimization of her

race, but on her internal, psychological conflicts over her identity and value as a human. In this paper I will argue that Sethe's resistance to the institutionalized racism and sexism of slavery, embodied by her tragic killing of her baby daughter, left her isolated from both the black and white worlds of antebellum and postbellum culture. Sethe's action represents the most extreme action that the female heroine of the slave narrative genre can wage against the patriarchal forces of slavery. Consequently, in comparison to the nineteenth century female slave heroines, whom the scholar Joanne Braxton has named "outraged mothers," Sethe represents the dark side of those heroines.

In Beloved, Morrison explores the powerful psychological and cultural ramifications of a slave mother who takes her outrage to the natural and supernatural limit by killing her own child. Morrison's revision of the female slave narrative is important because it relentlessly examines the psyche of the outraged mother gone awry--a woman who survived slavery at the highest cost. It is also valuable for the narrative's potential to suggest an alternative or an antidote to the limitations of the psychological identity of outraged mother. Morrison creates the character of Denver to serve as the bridge between the ex-slave identity and the free black identity. More specifically, Denver represents the possibility for the healing that must occur between her outraged mother Sethe and the community. Denver's embrace by and of the black community symbolizes the possibility for a

reversal of the isolation she and her mother have endured as a consequence of Sethe's resistance to slavery.

The slave narrative genre has a long history, characterized, until recently, by the works of black male authors beginning in the eighteenth century with James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, Willem Bosman, and Olaudah Equiano, and continued in the nineteenth century by John Jay, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and others. In Slavery and the Literary Imagination Deborah E. McDowell cites John Blassingame's statistic that less than twelve percent of the published slave narratives were written by women as evidence that the slave narratives are "primarily expressions of male history" in which black women are usually featured as victims (146). McDowell argues that contemporary African-American writers like Toni Morrison and Shirley Ann Williams create "neo-slave narratives" in order to revise the earlier male narrative texts that objectified women even as they conveyed the horrors of chattel slavery (146). As McDowell points out, the neo-slave narratives focus on "particular acts of agency within a degrading system" while the old slave narratives focus on the horrors of the "peculiar institution" itself (168).

In Beloved Morrison attempts to put "autonomy back into the hands of the slave" (McDowell 168). Because the idea of an autonomous slave, especially a female slave, would have alienated even the most sympathetic of nineteenth-century readers, most slave narratives focused on the slaveholders

and their system. Female slave narratives like Harriet Jacob's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl were appeals for support of the abolitionist cause directed at an audience composed of women who believed in the "cult of true womanhood." The goal of these narratives was to gain support for the abolition of slavery, not to uncover slave agency. And certainly, the dark side of slave agency that Morrison explores would never have made it to press. The portrayal of a complicated physical and psychological attempt at resistance by a slave woman would have been thought too controversial.

Writing about the agency of a black female in a time when the "ideal" woman was passive, docile, domestic, pure, and white would have done little to advance the cause of the slave woman. Instead, the rebellious slave woman would have been perceived as trying to dismantle the patriarchy upon which all of nineteenth-century white culture was based. In her discussion of the sexual exploitation of slavewomen, Bell Hooks makes a similar point about the difficulty abolitionists had with discussing the more "delicate" (read brutal) aspects of female slavery. She writes "It was difficult for the abolitionists to discuss the rape of black women for fear of offending audiences" (34). Morrison's foremothers could not afford to challenge the patriarchal assumptions of their white readers lest they lose white support for the abolitionist cause. On the other hand, because Morrison writes after the abolition of slavery and

after the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960's, she is free to relate the story of a slave woman's resistance to the racism and sexism of patriarchal America.

Morrison's Beloved breaks new ground because it reveals the psychological impact of slavery on slave women. Traditionally, Bell Hooks writes, "scholars have emphasized the impact of slavery on the black male consciousness, arguing that black men more so than black women, were the 'real' victims of slavery" (20). Indeed, based on the volume of scholarly work about male slave narratives, we can assume that the suffering of male slaves was thought to be more significant than those of female slaves. It is only recently that scholarly works about female slave narratives have begun to be published. One of the foremost of these new works is Joanne Braxton's Black Women Writing Autobiography. In her volume, Braxton discusses the work of Robert Stepto whose early work sets forth Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave Written by Himself as the central text of the slave narrative genre. Stepto defines the archetypal African-American as "an articulate hero who discovers the links among freedom, literacy and struggle" (Braxton 9). Braxton, however, suggests that Stepto's analysis should be expanded to include the archetype of the outraged mother as the counterpart to the articulate hero. Both the male and female archetypes move toward a search for identity, incorporate an escape that is a religious experience, and make a physical and spiritual

journey to freedom, but Braxton posits a major difference in their narratives: the welfare of the fugitive slavemother's child supersedes her own. Braxton writes that the archetypal African-American woman is "a mother because motherhood was virtually unavoidable under slavery; she is outraged because of the intimacy of her oppression" (19). The text that Braxton feels is most representative of the outraged mother, who appears in both male and female slave narratives, is Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slavegirl, Written by Herself.

Jacobs wrote her slave narrative in the tradition of the sentimental novel in hopes that it would reach a wide audience of sympathetic whites. Like Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, Incidents glorifies the "cult of true womanhood" in which the highest female attainment is sacrificial motherhood. Consequently, Jacobs' narrative is characterized by Linda Brent's sense of herself as a "fallen woman," due to her sexual victimization under slavery and her complete identification with her role as a mother. She had to appear the victim so as not to offend her genteel, white female readers. She also had to declare the ferocity of her motherly love in order to prove that slavery was an unnatural practice that threatened the precious mother-child bond. Jacobs hoped to elicit abolitionist sympathies by exposing the inhumane practice of dividing families, especially children from their mothers. Because her goal was to aid those still trapped in slavery, Jacobs masked her anger and

uncertainty about her own post-slavery life and identity. According to William Andrews, once free, the outraged mother was supposed to concern herself with incorporation into the white world, "attaining social validation in the North, perhaps via marriage, antislavery work, or purchase of [her] freedom" (178).

Morrison, on the other hand, is able to explore the "dark side" of the "outraged mother." The story of Sethe, Barbara Christian tells us, is based on an historical incident in which Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave, killed her daughter and attempted to kill herself. Of her dead child, Garner said, "now she would never know what a woman suffers as a slave" (A. Davis 21). Christian argues that Garner's story was "sensational enough to be known" by nineteenth-century black authors, but off-limits because it might "terrify" the sentimental audience (331). Morrison can fashion the story of Margaret Garner into a complex narrative exploring an ex-slave woman's search for identity and self-understanding precisely because her twentieth-century audience is not composed entirely of white people who support the "cult of true womanhood." Morrison's goal as a story teller does not involve risking the lives of those she wishes to empower.

According to Christian, a major difference between Beloved and the nineteenth-century slave narratives is the presence of an authenticating body of historical research on slavery and the slave community that gives Beloved the authority to move into an area of slavery less easy to

define--memory. Christian suggests that Morrison can confidently rewrite the slave narrative to reflect not only the historical research but also the psychological condition imposed by slavery. Christian says,

Morrison's novel, then, moves us into those spaces that we do not want to remember, into the spaces where there are no names but Beloved--those forgotten ones of the past even to the 60 million anonymous ones of the Middle Passage, those terrible spaces which for slave women, men and children can divide them as much as bring them together. (Christian 340)

Morrison's contribution to the slave narrative genre is the exploration of the psychological condition of the African-American informed by memories of life as a slave, fugitive, or freeperson. As a twentieth-century novelist, Morrison is able to probe the interior drama underlying the plot of escape, freedom, and literacy that characterizes so many of the nineteenth-century slave narratives. Beloved asserts itself as a black feminist novel, in which the politics of race, gender, and class interlock to (fore)ground black women as part of and central to female and American cultures.

Beloved is a realistic account of the amazing acts of resistance that black women, and even the most devoted of slave mothers, could and did commit under slavery. But Morrison's representation of the slave woman as embodied in Sethe is also a haunting portrait of outraged motherhood gone awry. Sethe and the slave narrator of Incidents, Linda

Brent, share similar slave backgrounds. Neither woman knew her mother, and both experienced cruel treatment after the death of a kind mistress or master. Linda lived under the constant threat of sexual and physical abuse by the lecherous Dr. Flint, who had, we learn from Linda, abused at least two other slave girls before he tried to make her his concubine. Likewise, a brutal beating was Sethe's reward for telling her bedridden mistress that the white woman's nephews had stolen her breastmilk. Both were permanently separated from the men they loved. Most importantly, both of them were mothers whose resistance of slavery was spurred by their fears for the fate of their children.

Both mothers sent their children ahead to freedom before they themselves could escape. There is no question that each mother was devoted to her children. If we compare Linda Brent's declaration of maternal love and self-sacrifice to Sethe's, we see that they do not differ greatly. Linda Brent says, "I knew the doom that awaited my fair baby in slavery, and I was determined to save her from it or perish in the attempt (Jacobs 90). From Linda's words we learn that she was determined to save her children from a fate at the hands of the master or die trying. Similarly, Sethe is unwilling to let schoolteacher, her master, determine the fate of her children. She says, "I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out" (163).

Sethe's identification with her role as mother is no less than Linda Brent's. There are, however, two important

differences in their narratives. First, Sethe's act of rebellion against the slave system leads not only to her organizing the escape of herself and her children, but it also extends to the death of her child in what she perceives as a mercy-killing. In an internal monologue made after she realizes that Beloved is the reincarnation of her dead baby daughter, we learn that Sethe thinks she spared her child the horrors of slavery. She says, "If I hadn't killed her she would have died" (200). Later in the same monologue, we learn that Sethe meant to kill all of her children and herself. She reveals that her "plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is" (203).

Harriet Jacobs could not have made statements like Sethe's in her nineteenth-century slave narrative because they suggest a course of action that the ideal mother of the period could in no way condone. The "cult of true womanhood" placed value on submission, innocence, and piety. The "ideal woman" "was thought to be most deeply interested in the success of every scheme which curbs the passions and enforces a true morality" (Hooks 48). In such an age, a narrative by a mother who kills her own child would inspire terror. Sethe's story does not speak of submission, innocence, or piety; instead, it speaks of aggression, experience, and self-election. Her "scheme" does not curb passion, but rather it is inspired by passion and executed with passion. The values Sethe feels she must embrace in order to protect herself and her children from the evils of slavery directly

oppose the values of weakness in women which the nineteenth-century "cult of domesticity" glorifies.

A second difference between the narratives of Sethe and Linda Brent is Sethe's inability to come to terms with her past or to create an identity for her future as a free person because of her fragmented psyche. Linda Brent's narrative is not about an individual's psyche as much as it is about the institution of slavery. Jacobs' goal in writing the Linda Brent narrative was to help abolish slavery; Jacobs does not fully express her own feelings about the personal psychological toll of her experience. In contrast, Beloved is most concerned with Sethe's fragmented psychological state. As the reader pieces together the narrative fragments of Sethe's story, as told by herself, Denver, Paul D, Stamp Paid, and the third-person narrator, we begin to realize that Sethe has been in a state of stagnation and arrested development for eighteen years. Her past and present intertwine, and she is suspended in between them because of her inability to create a post-slavery identity in which she is other than outraged mother. The exploration of the former slave woman's psychological development and the construction of a narrative that explodes the false constraints of the "cult of domesticity" represent Morrison's important contributions to and revisions of the slave narrative tradition.

Morrison's novels always include a character who is questing for his or her identity. In Beloved Sethe attempts

to come to terms with her slave past as a way of reclaiming herself and regaining her integrity. Morrison wants to recover the voices and identities of Sethe and all the slavewomen who could not tell their stories. She also wants to convey the importance of the African-American experience as it influenced American history. Morrison is not only creating an explanation of how a particular woman could come to murder her child but also revealing a condition that undermined, although it did not destroy, the individual and collective history and identity of African-American people and Euro-American people. Morrison wants to convey the very essence of what it means to be slave, black woman, and human being under such a condition. She also wants to explore the latent psychological effects of the "peculiar institution" on all Americans.

The experience of being a black woman under the condition of slavery is just now beginning to be documented in a gender-conscious way. In 1976 Herbert Gutman proclaimed that the black slave culture was based on "slave bicultural experience shaped over time by the development of expanded slave kin and quasi-kin networks and by the presence of intra- and intergenerational slave family linkages" (261). Gutman states that slave parents were forced to accommodate their behavior, not their beliefs regarding family network, love, and loyalty, to the expectation that a child might be sold (319). Gutman claims that slave family networks created and transmitted institutions and belief systems based on

their exposure to the values of African, Afro-American and Euro-American people. Angela Davis agrees with Gutman's thesis, but she suggests that Gutman's research should include "the multi-dimensional role of black women within the family and within the slave community as a whole" (4). She continues,

Expediency governed the slaveholder's posture towards female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women they were locked exclusively into their female roles. (6)

Female slaves were viewed as "instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force" (A. Davis 7). The practice of breeding was a socially legitimate method of simultaneously increasing the master's wealth and exploiting the black female.

The female experience of the slave was entirely bound up with her ability to reproduce. If a female slave became pregnant, she increased the master's holdings without his having to invest in a "breeder." In Beloved, Paul D, while musing on his own dollar value as a slave commodity, admits that he wasn't surprised to learn that the schoolteacher and his gang had tracked Sethe "down in Cincinnati, because when I thought about it now, her price was greater than his; property that reproduced itself without cost" (228). Thus, Sethe's attempt to murder herself and her children wreaks

havoc on the economic basis of slavery. Sethe's act of rebellion robs the schoolteacher of his claim on her family by mutilating what he sees as his property. Morrison writes, "Right off it was clear, to the schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four-- because she'd had the one coming when she cut) pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not" (149). What Morrison is attempting to do in Beloved is show us that Sethe's act of rebellion is not simply the deranged act of a desperate slave mother. Sethe's act of rebellion is addressed against slavery as an economic, racial and engendered system of oppression and exploitation.

Bell Hooks suggests that the sexual exploitation of the slave woman was even more dehumanizing than the racist exploitation of black women as hard laborers. She contends that the institutionalized sexism of the patriarchal white slaveowners created a social system that spared black males the humiliation of sexual assault and protected black male sexuality. However, such institutionalized sexism legitimized the sexual exploitation of black females. Hooks says,

While institutionalized sexism was a social system that protected black male sexuality, it (socially) legitimized sexual exploitation of black females. The female slave lived in constant fear that any male,

white or black, might single her out to assault and victimize. (24)

Morrison vividly illustrates Hooks's claim about the unique exploitability of the slave woman by portraying the brutal sexual assault that Sethe undergoes at the hands of the nephews. Sethe is forced to endure sexual torture when the nephews rob her of her breastmilk and then beat her mercilessly after she reports the incident to her mistress. This incident graphically reveals that the slave woman had no one to protect her from sexual exploitation

In Beloved, Sethe's "good" relationship with her mistress, Mrs. Garner, who never beats her, leads us to believe that her mistress will protect her from sexual exploitation, but Morrison shows us that such a belief is false. The sexual exploitation Sethe experiences as a slave woman is rooted in the sexism which Bell Hooks claims cowed white women into passively standing by for fear of their own safety (38). In a misogynist culture like the patriarchal world of the slaveowners, Hooks says,

Surely, it must have occurred to white women that were enslaved black women not available to bear the brunt of such anti-women male aggression, they themselves might have been the victims. (38).

In any case, successful appeals for the aid of a slavemistress were rare.

Morrison's exploration of Sethe's sexual exploitation as a slave woman not only reveals Sethe's thwarted attempts to

get help in protecting herself, but Beloved also uncovers what W.E.B. Dubois called the "double veil"--the dual anguish of experiencing oneself as other in terms of both race and sex. As we have seen, Sethe is intensely aware of herself as female because of her relationship with Halle and the other slave men at Sweet Home, because of her children, and later because of the sexual abuses she suffers. What Morrison shows us, however, is that Sethe's status as a slave makes her less than a woman in the eyes of the whites.

Because of Sethe's slave status, she is not granted the same respect or dignity that her childless mistress receives from the white community even though she and her mistress share many of the same duties on the plantation. Sethe works in the constant company of her mistress, Mrs. Garner, on the small plantation of Sweet Home; she is the only female slave on the plantation and her work is "women's work," in contrast to the field work performed by the male slaves. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out,

In smaller households, the slave woman worked in almost constant company with her mistress, and her work followed roughly the same division of labor by gender that applied to her mistress. Invariably, she worked harder and longer at dirtier and hotter jobs, but she had women's work. (165)

At Sweet Home, there is no question about Sethe's identification as a woman because her work is oriented toward the traditional female labor of cooking, cleaning, washing,

and mending. When it comes time for Sethe to be married, however, she is forced to experience herself as a kind of female different from her white mistress.

Morrison uses the traditional female initiation ritual of marriage to illustrate that the black female experienced herself as different from the white female. Sethe is fourteen when she and Halle decide to get married, and because she has no older woman on the premises to tell her the history of weddings for slaves, she assumes that her wedding will be a public celebration like Mrs. Garner's was-- with a preacher, cake, and dancing. Instead, Sethe must face the disappointment of learning that "it wasn't going to be nothing. They said it was all right for us to be husband and wife and that was it" (59). Her statement underlines the fact that slaves had to ask permission to marry because they did not own themselves. Either spouse could be sold, given away, or bred with some other slave at the whim of the master. Mrs. Garner gives Sethe a pair of earrings as a wedding gift, but the gesture demonstrates the whim of the mistress more than a sign of appreciation or affection. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese states,

Even the feeblest mistress had inducements of food, clothing, and privileges to offer her house servants as lures to their identification with her, but only a wise mistress indeed would understand the limits of those bribes. For whatever the indisputable intimacies and even friendships between black and

white women within the household, the realities of ownership overshadowed all. (164)

Indeed, Sethe finds out just how meaningless is her relationship with Mrs. Garner when she is cruelly beaten after reporting the dehumanizing sexual abuse which the schoolteacher and the nephews forced her to suffer. Sethe was dragged to the barn and robbed of her breastmilk by Mrs. Garner's "mossy mouthed" nephews. Although the young men, according to Sethe's description of them at their arrival on Sweet Home, have "nice manners," those manners are obviously reserved for white women only. Ironically, it is they who appear to be animals and not human when they take Sethe to the barn to milk her as if she were a cow. Because she is bedridden and female, Mrs. Garner is helpless to prevent the subsequent beating Sethe receives. Indeed, Sethe's beating is a result of Mrs. Garner's questioning the schoolteacher about the nephews' crime. Morrison makes it clear that even the good intentions of the mistress were no real protection for the female slave because both slave and mistress were subject to the patriarchal slave system.

The beating Sethe endures provides a horrific example of a slave woman having to experience herself as a female but not a white female. Because Sethe is pregnant at the time of the milk robbery, the major concern of her batterers is to protect the life of their property, the unborn slave child, so they dig a hole for her pregnant stomach before they lacerate her back with the whip. There were many known

instances of sexual and physical violence under slavery.

Fox-Genovese describes a brutal beating similar to Sethe's.

Analiza Foster's mother told of one slave woman whom a driver (slavedriver) "beat clean ter death." The woman was pregnant and fainted in the fields. "De driver said that she was puttin on an' dat she ort ter be beat. De master said dat she can be beat but don't ter hurt de baby." The driver then dug a hole in the ground into which he put the woman "bought ter her armspits, den he kivers her up an' straps her han's over her haid." He then took "de long bull whup an' he cuts long gashes all over her shoulders an' raised arms, den he walks off and leaves her dar ffer a hour in de hot sun" During the hour, "de flies an' de gnats day worry her, an' de sun hurts too an she cries a little, den the driver comes out wid a pan of vinegar, salt an' red pepper an' he washes the gashes. De 'oman faints an' he digs her up, but in a few minutes she am stone dead." Analiza Foster considered the case the worst she had heard of, but reckoned "dar wuz plenty more of dem." (190)

Analiza Foster's story is cognate to Sethe's story; the only real difference is that Sethe and her baby survived. Both stories underline the fact that slave women were constantly experiencing themselves as black and female, and that black females could be exploited racially, sexually, and economically without protection of law or public opinion.

Slavery forced upon slave women "a double view of gender identification" characterized by "gender conventions of southern society and the gender relations of the slave community," both of which failed to provide them with a satisfactory social definition of themselves as women (Fox-Genovese 373). Morrison shows us that slave women like Sethe, not only had a "double view" or an understanding of two different notions of what it meant to be female, but also a double experience of what it meant to be female.

A telling example of the psychological anguish a slave woman might feel is Sethe's experience of sexual exploitation ordered by the same schoolteacher who acknowledged the high quality of her skill in making ink is. Sethe mistakenly thought that she was valued for her labor, but she discovers that her learned skills come second to her natural capacity to reproduce. Moreover, she finds that as a black woman she is not protected from abuse the way a white woman would be. A black woman is characterized as a social other with no firm gender identification and to whom no social obligation is attached. Fox-Genovese describes the plight of the slave woman most elegantly when she states that the slave woman never enjoyed--or was never imprisoned by--a definition of womanhood so all-pervasive that it constituted the core of her identity. Her relations with members of the slave community and, in lesser measure, with whites offered her interlocking networks

of gender relations and gender roles, but both networks were subject to constant violation. (373)

Morrison shows us the paradox of gender identity for slave women through Sethe's experiences as a mother. The story of her sexual exploitation is an horrifying example of the violations experienced by slavewomen in their childbearing years. In Analiza Foster's story and especially in Sethe's story, we see that the actions of the pregnant slave woman affect not only the slave woman's life but also the future of the slave child. Deborah Grey White discusses the unique pressures faced by the female slave once she reached child-bearing age. White says that although marriage and the birth of children brought some security for a married couple, "the vagaries of a market economy and a slaveowner's death or peculiar whims were unpredictable factors that could result in the sale or permanent separation of a husband and wife" (103). White's research concludes that separations of slave spouses caused the slave woman to take her place as the "central figure in the nuclear slave family" (159). In Sethe's case, the death of her master resulted in her permanent separation from her husband, Halle, not because he or she was sold, but because conditions on the plantation degenerated so much that they decided to escape. Their plans went amiss leaving Sethe to escape without Halle. His absence leads to Sethe's emergence as the sole parent. White also tells us that after a spousal separation the continued survival of the slave family depended upon the slave mother's

connections with her family, "the black female community, and the positive female identity that family and community helped to forge" (163).

Sethe is an outraged mother whose very isolation from the black community prevents her from forging a positive identity as a black woman. Sethe's awareness of her unique exploitability as a female in terms of her labor and sexuality eventually leads her to rebel against the cruel slave system by removing her children and herself from its power, first by escaping to Ohio and then by trying to escape the material world entirely. Unfortunately, Sethe's extreme act of resistance isolates her from the people who could help her to create a positive identity for herself. Fox-Genovese suggests that for a slave woman who wanted to save herself and her children from the doom of slavery there was "a core of isolation in which no one could share" (387). According to Fox-Genovese, the "rage and determination" that could drive a slave mother to rebel against her master forced her into a solitary state where she could rely only upon herself. After all, aiding in someone else's rebellion or escape could yield the same punishment for both parties. A slave woman's husband might face death if he helped his wife to rebel. A slave who received help from another might compromise that person's safety as well as her own.

In Sethe's case, there was no one to help her rebel anyway. She was the only black female on Sweet Home and her husband was missing at the time that they were supposed to

escape together. When Halle does not appear at the appointed meeting place, Sethe sends their children ahead with the freedwoman who helped everyone at Sweet Home escape. Sethe sacrifices her own chance of escape to go back in search of Halle, but she fails to locate him and decides to escape on her own. Sethe's escape is helped along by a white girl and by Stamp Paid, but in Sethe's eyes their help was minimal. She finds that she was able to do it for the unborn child in her womb. Sethe feels a sense of responsibility and a certain kind of community or belongingness with her baby, but this feeling does not extend to a community larger than that of mother and daughter. Sethe briefly experiences community in the home of her mother-in-law. However, the community that Sethe experiences breaks down because Sethe resists when schoolteacher comes to reclaim her as his property. Sethe's resistance is a solitary act--she cannot count on the community to assist her. As Fox-Genovese states,

The slave system endowed masters with a power that few could defy and that the law could barely check. A slave woman, in resisting her condition, risked assaults on her person, the gradual erosion of ties to her community, and, ultimately, isolation or death. (395-96) . . .

In Beloved, Morrison illuminates the plight of the slave woman who dares to challenge the slavemaster. Sethe's total resistance leads to her total isolation. She not only ends up in prison for killing her child, the property of her

owner, but once in prison she is alienated from almost all of the community. Why does her act of resistance take such a tremendous toll on all of her future relations to community? We can find one reason in Fox-Genovese's statement quoted above. Although Sethe lives in a community of free blacks, their help could be rewarded with grave punishment for obstructing the Fugitive Slave Laws, so there may have been a reluctance to help her that was rooted in self-preservation.

Concerning the question of a slave woman's isolation from community, Fox-Genovese also suggests a deeper psychological answer that very much applies to the erosion of ties between Sethe and her community. The psychology of rebellion and resistance, according to Fox-Genovese, is one in which the slave woman struggles to assert her will against the will of the slaveowner. "So long as [the slaveowner's] power persisted, the slave woman lived always on the edge of an abyss, always confronted a dangerous world in which her naked identity would challenge his in solitary combat" (Fox-Genovese 396). Indeed, Morrison is exploring Sethe's response to her struggle of wills with schoolteacher. As an ex-slave, Sethe constantly lives and relives that struggle. Motivated by fears of re-experiencing life under the slaveowner, Sethe maintains the role of the outraged mother that she took on in order to resist slavery. Thus Sethe's identity as outraged mother stays operative; she fails to develop an identity that supports and is supported by community because she is mentally locked into the hand-to-

hand combat of an outraged mother with the memory of her slave past.

The first question we must examine, then, is how to justify Sethe's extreme resistance in terms of her identity and role as a mother. Secondly, why does Sethe continue to be isolated from the black female community, even after the incident is past; why does she fail to draw strength and support from the community? Joanne Braxton's definition of the "outraged mother" can help us to understand the sense of purpose that Sethe acquires when she realizes the magnitude of her identity as a slave mother.

The archetypal outraged mother travels alone through the darkness to impart a sense of identity and "belongingness" to her child. She sacrifices and improvises to create the vehicles necessary for the survival of flesh and spirit. Implied in all of her actions and fueling her heroic ones is abuse of her people and her person. (Braxton 21)

Morrison takes all of these qualities beyond their happy-ending limits in order to show us the negative side of motherhood under slavery and after slavery. In Beloved, Morrison explores the extent to which the psychological consequences of internalizing the outraged mother role can inhibit or stifle the formation of a positive black female identity. Sethe's complete identification with her role as outraged mother along with her sense that she must wage a constant and solitary battle against the threat of the

possible re-enslavement of herself and her family leads her to undertake acts of extreme violence resulting in the death of a daughter and the mutilation of her sons.

The theme of self-mutilation or self-division appears frequently in Morrison's novels. Susan Willis claims that self-mutilation is a metaphor for social otherness. She says that self-mutilation represents the individual's direct confrontation with the oppressive social forces inherent in white domination" (Specifying 103). This notion is exemplified in another Morrison novel, Sula, when Sula cuts off her fingertip in order to scare away some threatening white boys and says, "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you" (54)? Willis says:

Self-mutilation represents the individual's direct confrontation with the oppressive social forces inherent in white domination. Because it functions as a literary figure, self-mutilation is portrayed in Morrison's writing as liberational and contrasts sharply with all the other forms of violence done to the self.... In Morrison's writing, self-mutilation brings about the spontaneous redefinition of the individual, not as an alienated cripple--as would be the case in bourgeois society--but as a new and whole person, occupying a radically different social space. (Specifying 103-104)

Although Sethe directs her violence to her children instead of herself, I would have to argue that she is using

the violence as a confrontational tactic because she sees her children as extensions of herself, and she plans to kill herself after she kills them. Sethe thinks her children are her most precious and beautiful extensions of herself. She distills her hatred for white society into an act that contests white domination rather than transferring onto her children her hatred of whites or concomitant self-hatred. Furthermore, Sethe's act triggers a redefinition of her identity in the community. For almost a month she has lived among them and participated in the community but once she chooses to do violence against her own children, she becomes an individual fighting a solitary battle against the slaveowner's will to re-enslave her. Sethe's act is independent of the community and an attempt to transcend any position in or responsibility to community. She changes into a "super" outraged mother whose only responsibility to is to protect her children from the slaveowner's power. The black community ostracizes her because the super- or supra-human redefinition to which she aspires does not include them. Instead of looking to the black community for help in sharing her sorrow, Sethe retreats into herself. The community's response is to treat her quest for autonomy as a failed act of egotism. Again, we see that the total nature of Sethe's resistance to the slave system requires that she deny herself any other identity except that of outraged mother, and by her permanently residing in the outraged mother psychology she becomes isolated from the community.

Another way to perceive Sethe' internalization of the super- or supra-outraged mother identity is to look at it from a spiritual perspective. Sethe takes it upon herself to decide the fate of her children, a decision that to some members of the community might make her look as if she wants to rival the power of God. Sethe's autonomous act of baby killing is not the result of community consensus; instead, it is the act of a person who feels that she can save her children in the messianic sense. If we compare her actions to the "messianic idiom" which Molefi Kete Asante discusses in The Afrocentric Idea, we can see that Sethe takes outraged motherhood to a spiritual extreme. Molefi Kete Asante writes that the "messianic idiom is the most prevalent motif in radical black discourse" (127) The "messianic idiom" is defined as a kind of speech in which the speaker, who believes that he or she has a special calling to lead their people from bondage, asserts that there is "something better" than the current oppressed condition. Asante says:

While messianism is not always associated with speakers, it is sometimes found in individual acts of violence where an actor believes he is doing something for the benefit of the group. Historically, the need to deliver people from oppressive conditions motivated many rebels to rise against the slave system. (128)

When viewed in this way, Sethe's actions take on a messianic hue. Sethe sees herself embodied in her baby girl, and she cannot allow the schoolteacher to re-enact the degrading

scientific experiments or physical abuses she has already suffered at his hands. Sethe perceives herself as the deliverer of her family, and her attempt to kill all of her children and herself is an act of rebellion and survival because she believes in a supernatural world where her family will be rejoined with her mother. She plans to "take us all to the other side where my ma'am is" (203).

The following passage illustrates Sethe's sense of herself as a special person with a mission:

I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying GO ON, and NOW. Me having to look out. Me having to use my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide.

(162)

Because Sethe feels "that wide" upon the successful deliverance of her children to 124, she probably believes it is her mission to use her new-found superhuman strength and ability to enact, once again, the messianic impulse in order

to commit violence upon her children and thus deliver them from schoolteacher. Sethe simultaneously sees herself as creator, extension, and deliverer of her children. As their creator, she collects "every bit of life she had made;" as their extension, she collects "all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful;" and as their deliverer, she "carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil where no one could hurt them" (163).

Asante says that messianically inspired rebellions usually involved the deaths of one or two whites, "but the slave, who was sure to die, could not control his urge to slay the oppressors and, by doing so--if only for a short while--become a deliverer, achieve liberation" (128). Sethe's moment as a deliverer is, indeed, fleeting, and her scenario deviates from the standard Nat Turner-type slave revolt in that she inflicts the violence on her own children instead of on the whites, but she is definitely operating on the principle of "something better" to be found beyond the veil. Sethe does not achieve a true sense of liberation, however, because the black community fails to embrace her as a messiah. They feel that she acts too proudly, à la Hester Prynne, on the way to jail, and they respond by ostracizing her. Hence, when Sethe is released from prison she is not reabsorbed into the community that welcomed her for a glorious 28 days. Relegated to the edge of town with no one but her children and a bedridden mother-in-law, Sethe becomes

physically self-sufficient but emotionally alienated from possible identities besides that of mother.

The slave narrative that Morrison creates for Sethe reveals the dark side of the outraged mother. Sethe has so completely internalized the role of outraged mother that she continues to struggle in a battle of wills against the slave system even after it has been abolished. In contrast to the slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that portray the inhumanity of the institution of slavery, Morrison's narrative examines an individual's psychological struggle to find identity after experiencing slavery. Sethe's desperation and entrapment in the memories of her past as a slave and as a fugitive prevent her from "telling a free story." In order to create a post-slavery identity, Sethe must share her experiences with other ex-slaves. However, as we will see in Chapter Two, she is estranged from the black community because of her overwhelming identification with the mother-role. Thus, at the end of the novel Sethe is only beginning to develop her identity beyond that of the outraged mother.

Chapter Two

In Beloved, Morrison probes the interior drama underlying the plot of escape, freedom, and literacy that characterizes so many of the nineteenth-century slave narratives. As we have seen in the historical analysis in Chapter One, slave women had no control of their bodies. They wrote slave narratives in an attempt to assert control over themselves, but this was an impossible task because the form, style, and content of nineteenth-century slave narratives was controlled, in varying degrees, by the nineteenth-century white women who read them. Morrison's twentieth-century neo-slave narrative is an attempt to reclaim control of the slave woman's body and the body of slave history that was not fully explored due to nineteenth-century constraints. In Beloved, Morrison wants to liberate the slave body and the slave psyche from the old slave narratives. Sethe's resistance in terms of her physical escape and her murder of her daughter, as well as her creation of a psychological situation in which she tries to maintain the preoedipal mother-daughter bond, are all attempts to regain control of her own body. Sethe's psychological struggle to control her own body parallels Morrison's struggle to establish a black woman's control over the body of slave narratives and slave history. Morrison's project is a success because her narrative reveals the

psychological anguish caused by slavery and asserts control over the slave narrative genre by creating a story that focuses on the psychological dark side of slavery and its aftermath.

Sethe does not fully succeed in her attempt to reclaim control of her body or her history, however, because she fails to develop an identity beyond that of outraged mother. She can only get a sense of her value as mediated through her motherhood. Sethe's experiences under slavery include, among other things, separation from her mother and other slave women, labor alongside of whites without compensation, torture at the hands of whites, fugitive status, and the loss of her husband. These experiences give Sethe a low sense of self-esteem and self-worth. The only experience that provides her with a positive sense of self is her fulfillment of the mother-role. Thus the mother-role becomes central to Sethe's identity.

Sethe's failure throughout most of the novel to develop her identity beyond the mother-role is directly related to her inability to differentiate herself from her children. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Sethe believes that her children are extensions of herself. Her misperception of the boundaries between herself and her children not only makes it difficult for her to allow them to become independent people but also makes it difficult for her to perceive herself as an individual.

Sethe's murder of her baby daughter and attempted murder of her other children may be construed as a powerless slave woman's attempt to claim power over her own "flesh and blood." The murder, then, was an attempt to claim authority that failed because Sethe appropriated a tenet of the slave system against which she was reacting. Sethe mistakenly thinks that by establishing control over her children's bodies she might claim authority over her own body. The death of her daughter at her own hands, the disastrous result of Sethe's attempt to claim authority over herself, underline the fact that as a fugitive slave Sethe has no power at all.

Sethe's ensuing isolation is due in part to her inability to come to terms with her past powerlessness. The reappearance of her dead baby daughter in the form of Beloved, however, forces her to remember her experiences as a slave and fugitive. William Andrews explains the pain of remembering oneself as a person without authority. He says:

Reconstructing their past lives required many ex-slaves to undergo a disquieting psychic immersion into their former selves as slaves. During this journey, backward and within, a free person was forced to relive the most psychically charged moments in his or her past and to be reminded of thoughts and deeds about which he or she had come to feel very ambivalent. (7)

In Sethe's case, reconstructing the past almost paralyzes her because she gets lost in a preoedipal fantasy with her daughter in an attempt to make up for her past actions. Her renewed mother-daughter relationship with the reincarnated Beloved is an attempt to revise her own past as a slave and to reestablish some control over Beloved's lost life as means of re-establishing some authority over her own life.

Sethe represents a figure who was deprived of the knowledge of her ancestors and prevented, because of the everlasting fear of loss of self, to merge with community. Sethe valiantly saves her children from slavery, but she has not sufficiently developed her identity aside from being a mother. The past torments her so much that she can only live from day to day, trying to preserve what little identity she can by keeping her children in a perpetual state of dependence.

In the novel, Beloved symbolizes the missed opportunities for positive relationships among African-American slaves, and she also represents the fate of those African-Americans who were denied, under slavery, the possibility to develop their own identities. Because Sethe's killing of her baby daughter prematurely ends Beloved's life, neither Sethe nor Beloved is able to experience a complete mother-daughter relationship. As a result, both develop incomplete identities. Beloved remains perpetually in the preoedipal stage, while Sethe is unable to identify herself with any role except that of mother.

An exploration of the psychology of mother-daughter relationships as they manifest themselves in Sethe's quest for identity will help us to understand how the interactions between Sethe and Beloved underline Sethe's inability to extend her sense of self to include roles other than mother. In order to examine Sethe's relationship with Beloved, I will draw upon Nancy Chodorow's theories of the psychology of the preoedipal mother-daughter relationship.

Chodorow claims that there is a stage of early childhood development called the preoedipal occurring prior to the oedipal stage. In the preoedipal stage, the child is moving from a state of dependence, during which it depends entirely on the mother, to a state in which it is beginning to differentiate itself from her. Since in the preoedipal stage the child's sense of self is not fully formed, the child feels a sense of anxiety when it is separated from its mother because its expectations of primary love are frustrated. The child will then develop ego capacities and boundaries to ward off this anxiety (Chodorow 68-69). Chodorow claims that the anxiety conflict that the child experiences is "an infantile reaction to disruptions and discomforts in its relation with its mother" (70). She also posits that in order to combat its feelings of ambivalence and helplessness the infant may "split its perception" of the mother and "internalize only the negative aspect of their relationship. Or, it may internalize the whole relationship and split and repress only its negative aspect" (70).

In distinguishing between the male and female preoedipal experiences, Chodorow points out that a girl's attachment to her mother differs from a boy's in that the girl never fully differentiates herself from her mother. A boy's reaction to his mother becomes focused on his oppositeness to her while a girl experiences "a continuation of the two-person relationship of infancy" and sustains the intensity, frustration, and ambivalence of that relationship because of the different way that girls are mothered (Chodorow 98). Chodorow writes,

Because they are the same gender as their daughters and have been girls, mothers of daughters tend not to experience these infant daughters as separate from them in the same way as do mothers of infant sons. In both cases, a mother is likely to experience a sense of oneness and continuity with her infant. However, this sense is stronger, and lasts longer, vis-a-vis daughters. Primary identification and symbiosis with daughters tend to be stronger and cathexis of daughters is more likely to retain and emphasize narcissistic elements, that is, to be based on experiencing a daughter as an extension or double of a mother herself, with cathexis of the daughter as a sexual other usually remaining a weaker, less significant theme. (109)

Furthermore, Chodorow suggests that because of her strong preoedipal attachments to her mother, a girl never absolutely

transfers her attachment to the father in the oedipal stage. Girls become attached to both mother and father, and a girl's relative ambivalence to her mother continues (Chodorow 127). Finally, Chodorow suggests that a daughter's desires for her mother as a reflection and extension of herself can recur throughout her life and vice versa. Hence, Chodorow posits, the preoedipal mother-daughter experience whereby mothers and daughters do not fully separate and individuate "suggests a tendency in women toward boundary confusion and a lack of sense of separateness from the world" (110).

Because mothers and daughters never fully separate, their psychologies are intertwined. In Beloved, even though her baby daughter is dead, Sethe's attachment to the concept of the mother-daughter relationship is so strong that when the reincarnated Beloved appears Sethe resumes the mother-role. Although the mother-daughter relationship in Beloved is fraught with the problems that appear in normal preoedipal development, such as ambivalence, mutual narcissism and separation anxiety, these problems are compounded by Sethe's slave past.

The pressures and anxieties of motherhood during slavery caused slave women to take dramatic measures to protect their children from the horrible fate that they had personally experienced. Like Margaret Garner, a real slave woman who killed her daughter in order to spare her the horrors of slavery, Sethe kills Beloved rather than let her live under the slavemaster's whip. Upon her daughter's post-Civil War

return, however, Sethe is compelled to try to give Beloved the mothering she missed before her death. This desire to restore the preoedipal mother-daughter relationship results in Sethe's obsession with revising the past, her inability to perceive herself in a role other than mother, and her hesitancy to make a commitment to Paul D or the black community.

Sethe feels that it is more important for her to be prepared to engage in a struggle of wills with whatever force might cause her to lose her daughter than it is for her to extend her isolated world to include Paul D or the community. Although she is free, Sethe is trapped in a psychology of resistance that isolates her from community. Fox-Genovese tells us that for the slave woman resistance equalled isolation because no one could really help to protect her from the power of the slavemaster (396). She says, "Neither well-intentioned slaveholding women nor determined slave men could withstand the power of the master. Neither had any legal right to take the slave woman's struggle upon themselves" (396). Beloved's return propels Sethe back to her slave psychology of resistance. Consequently, Sethe's isolation from community intensifies because she is operating under the old assumption that she can neither endanger nor rely on anyone to help her struggle against the will of the slavemaster if he should return. Unable to differentiate between her slave past and her free present, Sethe begins

mothering Beloved with the assumption that slavery threatens to divide them again.

Sethe's need for control over her identity also re-intensifies upon Beloved's return. Having had no power over her own destiny while a slave and a fugitive, Sethe transforms mothering into a space in which she can control her own identity as well as Beloved's. Sethe's sense of powerlessness, alienation and fragmented identity is evident in her history as a mother and daughter under slavery. As a baby, she "sucked from a woman whose job it was" (60). "Nan had to nurse white babies and me too because ma'am was in the rice. The little white babies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own" (200). A situation in which the birth mother does not nurse her own child suggests social otherness because in "western society there is usually only one married couple with children in any household (and thus only one mother with young children)" (Chodorow 57). Such a nuclear structure promotes an intense and exclusive mother-infant bond. Sethe barely knew her mother except as a "particular back" among many backs, a "cloth hat as opposed to a straw one" (30). A woman whose most identifying mark was a brand under her breast, Sethe's mother took her small daughter behind the smokehouse, showed her the brand, and said, "If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark" (61). Metaphorically, Sethe's mother is the mark and the mark is slavery. A daughter of slavery, then,

Sethe has no mother (or family) in the exclusive Western pattern, and so she is denied the memory of intimacy with her mother and her ancestral roots.

Deprivation of family and community keeps Sethe in a perpetual state of maternal regression. One tenet of maternal regression is that "a mother identifies with her own mother (or with the mother she wishes she had) and tries to provide nurturant care for the child. At the same time, she re-experiences herself as a cared-for child, thus sharing with her child the possession of a good mother" (Chodorow 90). Sethe is separated from her children for a time because she arranges their escape before her own. Once she is reunited with her children, she is anxious to nurse her "crawling already" baby girl. In fact, thoughts of getting her breast milk to her baby girl inspire her on her journey to 124 because she wants to save her baby girl from the social alienation that Sethe feels herself. She says, "I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left" (200). For Sethe, providing milk symbolizes the mother-child connection; breast-feeding bonds child and mother and gives both a sense of belonging--child to mother and mother to child.

Sethe's maternal tendencies are associated with milk. In one scene, she plans to cook a special dinner for Paul D, and she thinks that "there was no question but that she could do it. Just like the day she arrived at 124 sure enough she had

milk enough for all" (100) Significantly, milk reminds Sethe of her arrival at 124; she associates milk with the triumph of her escape from slavery and subsequent reunion with her children. Similarly, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved go ice-skating, and upon their return Sethe warms a pan of milk for them. Once again, the milk symbolizes Sethe's identity as a mother and the positive reinforcement she derives from it. In addition, the milk symbolizes Sethe's vicarious gratification through the gratification of her daughters and alerts us to Sethe's return to the role of maternal provider. Images of milk also recall Sethe's torture by schoolteacher and the nephews. The theft of her milk infuriates her because it denies her the power to provide for her children. Feeling that she has "milk enough for all" contrasts sharply with the deprivation of her own milk-poor childhood. Having "milk enough for all" means she has the power to provide for everyone. Throughout the novel, the act of providing is a positive one for Sethe because caring for others allows her to revise her slave childhood and reexperience it as abundant instead of deprived.

However, the desire to be a "good mother" becomes a self-destructive psychological drive for Sethe. She sends her baby girl ahead on the escape but prepares a sugar teat that the girl can suck so that she does not forget Sethe's breast. When Sethe arrives at 124, she is especially anxious to nurse her girl. Baby Suggs sees Sethe feeding the girl and "laughed at them, telling Sethe how strong the baby girl was,

how smart, already crawling" (94). Baby Suggs knows that the child is already past needing the total exclusivity of mothering that Sethe insists upon giving the child. Indeed, according to Chodorow, the ability to crawl encourages a child's feelings of independence through "mastery of its environment" (72). Prolonging the early mother-child relationship gratifies Sethe because she can experience the infant as "continuous with [her]self and not separate," and simultaneously project herself onto the child (Chodorow 85). Sethe craves the experience of being a daughter and so tries to extend her "crawling already" girl's babyhood so that she can experience daughterness herself.

When Beloved re-enters Sethe's life eighteen years later, Sethe is overpowered by an urge to mother and be mothered. Because Sethe was robbed of her own chance for daughterhood, she commends Beloved for returning to her daughter role. She says, "You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one" (203).

Obviously, Sethe's experience with her own mother was shaped and prematurely ended by the system of chattel slavery. Therefore, Sethe became differentiated from her mother much sooner than was necessary. Chodorow tells us, "An investigation of the requirements of mothering and the mothering experience shows that the foundations of parenting capacities" emerge during early infantile development (77).

Sethe's early separation from her mother not only deprived her of being a daughter but also robbed her of some of the tools she needed to become a mother. For instance, Chodorow tells us, "the experience of satisfactory feeding and holding enables the child to develop a sense of loved self in relation to a loving and caring mother" (78). As we have seen, Sethe was fed by a nurse and spent very little time in the arms of her own mother and thus she becomes differentiated from her mother sooner than would a child who experiences an exclusive maternal relationship.

Usually, children become differentiated from their mothers when they start to realize that their mothers have interests of their own (Chodorow 67).

The child comes gradually to perceive the mother as separate and as 'not me.' This occurs both through psychological maturation and through repeated experiences of the mother's departure.... This beginning perception of its mother as separate, in conjunction with the infant's inner experience of continuity in the midst of changing instances and events, forms the basis for its experience of self.

(Chodorow 67)

Because the cruelties of slavery force Sethe's early separation from her mother, the experience of early childhood development upon which Sethe draws is one that reminds her that separation from the mother is negative. Consequently, Sethe's interactions with Beloved promote continued co-

dependence and merging rather than independence and individuation. This behavior could be viewed as Sethe's rejection of her past domination by the slave system. Fox-Genovese reminds us that the slaveholder's power superseded slave women's "relations as daughters, wives, and mothers with the men and women of their slave community" (30).

Beloved also encourages Sethe to recreate the mother-daughter oneness that they shared eighteen years earlier. Since Beloved was approximately two years old when she died, she never perceived Sethe as separate from herself. The only time she was separated from her mother was the week Sethe escaped from Sweet Home. Although Beloved comes to 124 in the body of a young woman, she exhibits the desires of a preoedipal baby. The three most significant traits Beloved displays upon her return as the preoedipal daughter are her insatiable thirst, her fear of disintegration, and her dislike of Paul D. These traits suggest Beloved's infantile dependence, her incomplete sense of individuation, and her perception of Paul D as a rival for her mother's love and attention.

Thirst motifs in the novel represent Beloved's dependence on Sethe. Beloved, whose breath smells sugary like "new milk," is always thirsty. In the preoedipal schema, babies identify the breast with their mothers, and they transfer their desire for the breast onto their mothers. Beloved's thirst and craving for sweet things ("sugar could always be counted on to please her" [55]) link her to the preoedipal

stage when Sethe gave her the sugar teat and her own milk. Symbolically, Beloved's thirst for Sethe is the preoedipal child's psychological need for its mother's complete attention. Without the mother's attention the child becomes frustrated and ambivalent.

Beloved's ambivalence toward her mother is demonstrated by her behavior in the clearing. Before she kisses Sethe, she tries to strangle her. This violent act is juxtaposed with an internal monologue in which Sethe thinks about community and her ambition to include Paul D in her life. Sethe's monologue shows that she feels a conflict between loving/providing for her children and enjoying community. In her monologue, we learn that in the twenty-eight days between her escape and the baby killing, Sethe participated in community life. "Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own which made it better" (95). She invokes the memory of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and tries mentally to recreate the atmosphere of Baby Suggs's rituals in the clearing where local ex-slaves shared grief and celebrated freedom. Sethe considers Paul D as a life partner--a person who can help her recreate that earlier community. But she is scared by the images of slavery that he brings to her mind: "Halle's face smeared with butter and the clabber too; his own mouth jammed full of iron, and Lord knows what else he could tell her if he wanted to" (96). These images overwhelm

Sethe, and she feels as if she's being strangled. This strangulation represents Sethe's inability to cope with her conflict between the mother-role and a community role. At the same time, the strangulation is a symbolic exaggeration of the preoedipal child's cry to be noticed when its mother becomes interested in other things. Beloved feels threatened by the interest in community which Sethe exhibits due to the appearance of Paul D.

Following the strangulation, Beloved massages Sethe's neck and kisses her under the chin. The kissing tableau recalls the nursing image and symbolizes the infant's attachment to its mother. Beloved's kisses are the infant's reward to a mother who puts everything on hold in order to devote herself to the child. Sethe lets the kissing go on because it reaffirms her identity as a mother, just at the point when she is considering changing and expanding her identity to include Paul D and perhaps rejoin the community. Even though Sethe manages to "separate herself" from the kissing Beloved, her resolve to rejoin community is weakened by Beloved's affection.

Paul D rivals Beloved for Sethe's attention and affection. Beloved feels threatened and angered by Paul D's desire for Sethe because she also desires Sethe. According to Chodorow, there is a stage in infant development (at approximately two years old) when the child learns to expect separation from the mother for specific amounts of time. The child is able to tolerate these separations because it

believes the mother will return. By making love in the daylight hours, Paul D and Sethe throw Beloved off schedule because Beloved expects to see Sethe in the daytime. Beloved's demands to see Sethe's face, like a baby's demands for feedings, must be met on schedule or she feels abandoned. Beloved feels that Paul D is usurping her time with Sethe. "But now--even the daylight time that Beloved had counted on, disciplined herself to be content with, was being reduced, divided by Sethe's willingness to pay attention to other things. Him mostly" (100).

The words "reduced" and "divided" illustrate Beloved's fear of being alone because she has not learned that she is a separate entity from her mother. Likewise, the time Paul D spends with Sethe frustrates Beloved because she cannot understand why her mother would have separate interests. Again, separateness in the preoedipal stage threatens the child's sense of existence. According to Chodorow,

the infant is not aware of the mother as separate, so it experiences dependence only when such separation comes to its attention, through frustration, for instance, or the mother's departure. At this point, it is not only helplessness and object loss which threaten, but also loss of (incipient) self--disintegration. (62)

Beloved's fear of disintegration is exemplified by her two dreams of "exploding and being swallowed" (133). The exploding image recalls her death as a baby, a violent

beheading accompanied by spurting blood. It also symbolizes her fragmented identity. Because swallowing or ingestion is the opposite of birth, her fear represents a fear of re-entering the womb and losing her sense of self as reflected in her mother's face. Beloved's feelings of disintegration are a sign of her growing frustration due to her fear of separation from her mother, a separation that Beloved attempts to prevent by sabotaging Sethe's relationship with Paul D.

When Sethe continues to show interest in Paul D, even after Beloved strangles her, Beloved changes her strategy. She seduces Paul D in order to keep him away from Sethe. Beloved wants her action to accomplish three things. First, she wants to punish Sethe for killing/leaving/ignoring her by sabotaging Sethe's possible identification with and acceptance of a role other than mother. Second, she wants to eliminate her rival for Sethe by interesting him in herself instead. Third, she wants to ruin Sethe's relationship with Paul D because he could help reunite her with the community. Sethe, however, puts an end to Paul D's digression with Beloved by commanding him to "come upstairs where you belong" (131). Sethe's assertion of herself and her needs causes Beloved to feel like she is coming apart. After Paul D and Sethe reestablish their sexual pattern, Beloved sucks her finger (substitute nipple) and loses a tooth (she is beginning to dissolve); accordingly, the third-person narrator points out her fear of disintegration. "It is

difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself" (133). Necessarily, Beloved's feelings of disintegration parallel Sethe's movement toward integration with community through Paul D because a mother's interest in the outside world causes frustration for an infant.

Sethe's movement toward community, however, is short-lived. She retreats to her mother-role when Paul D confronts her with the newspaper article about the baby-killing. She tries to justify the act by explaining her outrage at slavery, her perception of her children as extensions of herself, and her belief that in death they would be "beyond the veil" where no one could hurt them. Her lack of remorse, however, encourages Paul D to tell her that she was wrong to do it and that she should have found "some other way" to save them (165).

Her notion that only she could determine the safe fate of her children scares Paul D. He thinks, "This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe don't know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed" (164). Sethe claims omnipotent motherhood. She says, "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (165). Sethe's failure to think of herself and her children as separate individuals leads her to confuse the boundaries

between them. Furthermore, as Paul D observes, she also confuses the boundaries between herself and the world.

Chodorow claims that confusion of boundaries is characteristic of problematic mother-daughter preoedipal relationships (110). Sethe's defense of her mother-role underlies her need to re-experience herself as the daughter of a "good mother." As we have seen, Sethe can re-experience daughterhood by mothering. After Paul D leaves, she totally reassumes her identity as mother, foregoing any hopes of reuniting with community. Sethe interprets Paul D's leaving as a sign that she will never be accepted back into community. "She should have known that he would behave like everybody else in town once he knew" (173). Unable to cope with Paul D's rejection, Sethe relinquishes her ties to community, saying "Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is this room. This here's all there is all there needs to be" (183).

Sethe's inability to communicate with Paul D is another example of her isolation and arrested development. Sethe's original isolation stemmed from her resistance to slavery in which she was a lone actor who could expect little support from slave men or slave women. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese tells us that when a slave woman and her master confronted each other, "The woman faced him alone. She looked on naked power" (374). Similarly, Sethe tries to combat schoolteacher's absolute power by establishing her own authority over the lives of her children. Her authority

takes the form of the powerful outraged mother who will not stand for the suffering of her children. Consequently, when Paul D brings up this past event and questions Sethe's authority to decide the mortality of her child, Sethe retreats to the only role in her life in which she exercised her own authority--the solitary "outraged mother." By saying that the world outside her door is not for her, Sethe is saying that since she has no authority in the outside world she does not care to operate in it. Moreover, her statement also assumes that she is isolated from community because she has no authority in it.

After Sethe shuts out the real world, she creates an alternate world of female community in which she and Beloved interact, mirror each other, and take on each other's roles. Sethe realizes that Beloved is the reincarnation of her daughter when Beloved sings the lullaby Sethe made up for her children. This realization serves only to reinforce her identity as mother, and it fuels her nostalgia for the time when she was the mother of four small children who were totally dependent on her. "If her daughter could come back home from the timeless place--certainly her sons could, and would come back from wherever they had gone to" (183). Sethe tries to become the ultimate self-sacrificing mother in order to make reparations for killing Beloved and to experience the mothering she never had. She talks about doing and seeing things they never had a chance to do before, "because you mine and I have to show you these things and teach you what a

mother should" (201). Sethe thinks that peace and forgiveness belong to her now that Beloved is back, but she is mistaken. Beloved wants to punish Sethe for abandoning her and leaving her without an identity.

Sethe and Beloved become engrossed in mutual narcissism. They mirror each other in every action; they dress alike and mimic each other. This narcissistic behavior, however, leads to the destruction of their alternate world. Sethe firmly shuts the world out when she quits her job and locks the door. This action gives the women the opportunity to "be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds" (199). Without an income, however, food becomes scarce, and Sethe denies herself food so that Beloved may have it. Beloved grows stronger while Sethe grows weaker. Beloved attacks Sethe for "leaving her behind." She tells the story of the horrors of the world "beyond the veil" in order to make Sethe feel guilty about preempting her life.

Beloved's story encompasses not only her preoedipal desires and fears but also a poetic imagining of the "Middle Passage." Beloved's preoedipal desires for Sethe are represented in a passage during which Beloved 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/a hot thing" (210). On another level, Beloved's quest for her mother's face is symbolic of the whole slave experience--a quest for an useable past, for African history. Beloved's anxieties of

separation from her mother represent the loss of African-American life and possible identity and are also symbolic of the scattering of native African culture and community.

Beloved's story describes what it was like to be among the living dead of the "Middle Passage," during which the Africans were dehumanized on slave ships and brought across the Atlantic Ocean to be sold. She tells of the weakening and death of Africans on the slave ships. The ill health and deprivation of the captives are illustrated by the cessation of their bodily functions. She says, "In the beginning we could vomit/now we do not/now we cannot"; "if we had more to drink we could make tears" (210). In the course of the journey, "storms rock us and mix the men into the women (211). People are packed so tightly that they "cannot fall because there is no room" (211). The inhumanity of the journey makes many people desire death, but it is an uncelebrated death: "Those who are able to die are in a pile" (211). Beloved describes riding on the back of a man who dies. She knows he is dead when "his song is gone" (212). His song is the history and culture of Africa that could not be wholly transmitted after the loss and grief of the "Middle Passage."

In the larger historical context, Beloved represents all the death and destruction that whites perpetrated on blacks under the condition of slavery. Furthermore, Beloved is a visualization of what Stamp Paid dubs "the jungle that white folks planted" in black people. He says, "But it wasn't the

jungle the blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place" (198). The jungle is a metaphor for the horror of prejudice and power that whites succumbed to in the perpetuation of the slave system.

Indeed, *Beloved* is a victim and a symptom of the horror of the jungle because she embodies the disruption of African family, ancestral, and cultural ties. *Beloved's* death could be considered infanticide. Besides the Margaret Garner case, there are other instances where mothers were accused of infanticide. In 1830 a North Carolina slave woman was convicted of murdering her own child. In 1831 a Missouri slave was accused of poisoning and smothering her infant, and in 1834 another slave woman was said to have killed her newborn (White 88). Deborah Gray White says that the few women who killed their children "claimed to have done so because of their intense concern for their offspring" (88). *Sethe* says as much about her killing act. And *Sethe's* story reveals that her action was a terribly costly form of resistance resulting in her isolation from community. Fox-Genovese's analysis of infanticide considers what Stamp paid calls the "jungle." She says that infanticide in the slave community "implicitly acknowledged that the oppression of slavery had won out over the vigor and vitality of the slave community--and even more, over the slaveholders' cherished paternalistic ideal of family, white and black" (324). By committing infanticide a slave woman might destroy her owner's property (and sometimes his own child). The jungle,

then, is the world the slaveholders made in which human life, white or black, had no value except its value as a commodity. Under such a system, relationships among people, both black and white, were inhibited from developing fully.

In terms of Beloved's role in the novel, her own preoedipal anxiety, which is brought about by her separation from Sethe, symbolizes the losses to African-American slaves of opportunities to form relationships and develop identities. For Sethe, Beloved's reincarnation evokes her slave past and underlines the fact that she is uncertain of her own post-slavery identity. In order to gain any authority over, or understanding of her past she must face the paradox of how to go on with her own life after killing her daughter. Sethe's present is a limbo defined by her inability to develop an identity beyond that of mother.

The appearance of Beloved acts as a catalyst for Sethe's attempt to revise her own past. By being a "good mother" to Beloved, Sethe is striving to reclaim the mothering of which she herself was deprived under slavery. Moreover, by indulging in a preoedipal fantasy with her daughter she is attempting to revise her past and assert some authority over her body and her identity. Even at the end of the book when Sethe is starving herself to death so that Beloved can eat, we see Sethe asserting herself as the ultimate sacrificial mother. Sethe's starvation is another way of trying to control her own body while simultaneously controlling her daughter's body.

Unfortunately, Sethe feels that the only way to have any authority over her life is to identify totally with the role of outraged mother both in slavery and freedom. Under slavery, the outraged mother role is one that necessarily leads to her isolation because no one could help a rebelling slave woman. Neither slaveholding women nor slaves "had any legal right to take the slave woman's struggle upon themselves" (Fox-Genovese 396). In freedom, taking on the outraged mother role propels Sethe to assume total authority over herself and her children, thus creating isolation. At the end of the novel, Morrison suggests that Sethe's isolation from community may be healed by shedding the outraged mother role and through her relationship with Paul D. Throughout most of the novel, however, Sethe fails to accept community's role in her post-slavery existence because she is trapped in a mode of fugitive resistance that depends upon the assertion of individual will and thus can only lead to her isolation from the black community.

Chapter Three

In Chapter One, we see that Sethe's role as an outraged mother propels her to escape slavery and resist the authority of the whites who want to return her and her children to slavery. In Chapter Two, we see that Sethe's overidentification with her role as outraged mother extends into her present life as a free woman, causing her to recreate a mother-daughter fantasy with Beloved as a way to compensate for the mothering she feels they both missed as a result of slavery. In both chapters, we have seen that Sethe's total physical and psychological resistance to the authority of slavery leads to her isolation from both the white and black communities. In this chapter, I will argue that Denver represents an alternative to the isolation that Sethe suffers. Denver is formed by her mother's slave past, triumphant escape, messianic impulse to deliver her family by killing them, and her subsequent withdrawal from community. Denver, however, is able to reach out for community when her mother cannot for two reasons. First, Denver has had the opportunity to experience the kind of sustaining relationships that her mother never could. And second, Denver is not totally paralyzed and isolated as Sethe is by horrific memories of a slave past.

Historically, Barbara Christian points out, whites did not want blacks to express memories of their lives or the lives of their ancestors who were not slaves (332). Whites wanted to perpetuate the notion that blacks had always been in bondage so that they could justify enslaving them. The censure of black history also reveals the knowledge of the dominant culture that history is empowering and the knowledge that their interests would be well-served by denying blacks their history. Memories of a pre-slavery past were not the only memories that the whites suppressed. Any memories of the brutality of the slave system were discouraged by whites because they wanted to perpetuate the myth that blacks were inferior and that slavery was good for blacks. For years after Emancipation Eurocentric scholars like U. B. Phillips and the White Derivation School sought to undermine notions of a distinct Afro-American culture so that they could justify slavery in the Americas. In the post-Civil Rights era, however, Morrison is able to create a novel that focuses on the memories of ex-slaves in order to reveal not only the incredible psychological damage done by slavery but also the power of the Afro-American community to transmit its unique and distinct history and culture through the sharing of memories.

In Beloved, Morrison shows us how difficult it was for ex-slaves to deal with their memories of slave pasts while trying simultaneously to establish new identities as free people. For Sethe, coming to terms with her slave past means

not only remembering but also attempting to forgive herself for the choices she made, as well as taking steps toward forging a new identity based upon relationships within the black community. Morrison gives us some hope at the end of the novel that Sethe will, with the help of Paul D, a representative of community, take control of her memories and her past. But the hope Morrison gives us is tentative, and she makes it clear that the trauma of slavery may have been too great for Sethe to overcome. On the other hand, Denver's character in Beloved suggests an alternative identity to Sethe's outraged mother identity. Denver represents a new generation of Afro-American women whose identities are nurtured and confirmed by the collective memories of the Afro-American community.

According to Barbara Smith, Morrison "depicts in literature the necessary bonding that has always taken place between black women for the sake of barest survival" (177). In Beloved Morrison not only shows the dark side of the outraged mother, but she also reveals the problematic nature of the black female community. Susan Willis' examination of modern writing by black woman reveals that they

problematize the notion of community. Rather than paying it lip service, they scrutinize the community as it existed in the past in order to question whether or not and in what form it might exist in the future.

("Black Women Writers" 214)

Indeed, in Beloved Morrison shows that the black female community can both isolate and heal. While Sethe's life is characterized by a lack of communal female care, guidance, or spiritual sustenance, Denver's life is shaped by her relationship to a female ancestor and her call for help is answered by the black female community.

Sethe does not call for help when she is resisting slavery because to call for help might jeopardize others. In addition, she feels singly responsible for her children. Thus, Sethe takes on the persona of the outraged mother and becomes isolated from community. Susan Willis asserts that in other modern novels by black women the community "is in the telling and the listening" ("Black Women Writers" 217). The issue of telling and listening is also central to Morrison's notion of community in Beloved. Sethe's failure to look to the female community for support and her creation of an alternative community in which she shares authority with her baby daughter sentence her to the margins of African-American society. Sethe could gain community if she would speak and listen to the other people who also endured heinous suffering under slavery, but she has difficulty sharing her story because it is so painful to her. To some extent Sethe is isolated from community because she refuses to tell her story or to listen to anyone else's. Denver, on the other hand, is a success at merging with the community because she shares, telling the pain of her family, and in doing so presents the female community with the opportunity

to fulfill their role as caretakers of African-American history.

The authority of collective memories over individual, unrelated memories is what makes the black female community so powerful and so central to the contemporary African-American novel. By telling her family's story, Denver adds to the collective memories of the black community; she establishes her historical context and a point of origin upon which she can build her identity. Denver's contribution to the collective African-American memories of slavery and pre-slavery empowers her. Likewise, the community embraces her as another link to their history and to their future.

Denver's departure from 124, her mother's home, is a symbolic journey that gives her a means of defining herself and "retrieving the collective past" (Willis, "Black Women Writers" 220). As a post-slavery black woman, Denver has the freedom to leave 124. She is not bound there by the crumbled slave system, but by her mother's unwillingness to experience the future. Denver's break from her mother and her emergence as an adult member of the black female community provide an alternative to Sethe's isolation. Sethe thinks that the business of the present is to keep the past at bay. Denver, who has not experienced the horrors of slavery, does not share her mother's arresting memories of abuse. Instead, Denver wants to unearth and enjoy her linkage with the black community. She emerges from a childlike state as a woman capable of action--a woman who can tell her own story.

From the moment she is born until her final scene in the novel, Denver's identity is defined by community. A white girl, Amy Denver, helps Sethe deliver Denver. Hers is a triumphant embrace into the world. "The magic of her birth testified to friendliness" (29). Successfully birthed by "two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws" (84), Denver represents the good efforts of two disenfranchised women who are fleeing with hope for better lives. The girl insists that Sethe tell Denver who "brought [Denver] into this here world" (85).

This story becomes Denver's favorite story because it is her story; however, it is not until she tells Beloved the story that she can really own it. Before Beloved appears at 124, Denver has no one with whom to share her story because her family already knows it. The telling of her birth story to an audience reinforces her identity as a unique individual separate from, but linked to, community. For Denver, the act of telling her story produces a sense of her individual place in the larger context of slave history, and her telling of it is also a sign that she is creating a role for herself as one who will transmit black cultural history. Furthermore, Beloved represents a triumph for the continuing tradition of black autobiography, which gives voice to the history of the black community. Writing from within the black community, Morrison provides self-realization for all African - Americans. As William Andrews states:

Self-realization for black autobiographers involved the finding of one's voice, the reclaiming of language from the mouth of the white other, and the initiation of the arduous process of fitting language to voice instead of the other way around. (290)

Morrison's neo-slave narrative accomplishes this reclamation of language for the black community by using black voices to tell the story of slavery and its aftermath.

Through Denver's "tellings" we see the process of blacks reclaiming their history and community. Denver's birth story speaks to community ties and fills her with a sense of debt. She loves her story because it is all about herself,

but she hated it too because it made her feel like a bill was owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it. But who she owed or what to pay it with eluded her. (77)

Denver's sense of debt signifies an unconscious acknowledgement of her ancestors. She represents the new generation of free African-Americans, and what she owes her ancestors is the proof that the free existence they bought for her with their lives matters. Denver's sense of debt to the African-American community is a sign of her need to make a contribution to that community. It becomes increasingly clear to Denver that she will not be able to have an identity of her own if she remains isolated from the community.

As long as Denver stays with her mother, she must share her mother's isolated existence because Sethe treats Denver

as an extension of herself that she needs to protect. Sethe says to Paul D, "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms" (15). The tree represents the torture she endured as a slave, and the haint represents all the people she lost due to slavery. Sethe's identity as a mother, the only identity she can allow herself, falls into question if Denver is not kept in a childlike state--held in Sethe's arms like a baby. Sethe thinks, "As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered" (42). Thus, Sethe keeps Denver in a dependent state, but by keeping Denver from the past, Sethe deprives her of her history.

Sethe finds that the best way to keep history from reenacting itself upon her and Denver is by not speaking of it. The psychological toll of slavery on Sethe prevents her from seeing any alternatives to her isolated life. Sethe fears the ever-present possibility of exploitation. Underlying her desire to keep Denver in a childlike state is an unconscious need to protect her daughter from abuses like those she suffered at the hands of schoolteacher and the nephews. Paula Giddings informs us that during the years just prior to and immediately following the Civil War ex-slave women "seemed most concerned, as they were in slavery, to protect their daughters from continuing exploitation by white men" (71). But no matter what her mother fears, Denver has to face her own fears. Rather than remain an extension

of her mother, Denver must break through the isolation and establish her own identity.

It is important for the development of her identity that Denver knows about her family history. The connecting link between Denver's family's slave past and her own free future is the ancestor figure. According to Herbert Gutman, the ancestor takes responsibility for "transmitting cumulative slave experiences and beliefs" (308). Morrison defines ancestors as persons who are not just parents; "they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" ("Rootedness" 343). Deborah Grey White tells us that old bondwomen who served as midwives, doctors, and spiritual leaders "embodied the link between generations" (116). In Beloved, Baby Suggs exemplifies the "ancestor" figure; she shares with Denver an accumulated knowledge of slave history and beliefs as well as specific genealogical information. Denver's relationship with Baby Suggs is the foundation for her future relationship with the larger black community.

Unlike Sethe, Baby Suggs is not totally fragmented by the psychological impact of slavery. Sethe cannot deal with her slave history because it triggers so many memories of her life when she had no control over it. Baby Suggs, however, is able to communicate the past triumph and grief of Denver's family. Baby Suggs uses storytelling to pass on values as well as history. Importantly, she tells Denver about her

father. Generally, White points out, when slave fathers "were separated from their offspring, mothers were the crucial link between the child and his or her unknown father. She supplied the information that made the father live in the child's mind" (109). Baby Suggs assumes this role instead of Sethe because Sethe can neither communicate nor come to terms with her memories of slave life. Denver says, "Grandma used to tell me his things" (207). Knowing about her father gives her a sense of identity. Baby Suggs tells Denver about her father's ability to read and figure, to invent things, and to practice folk medicine. Halle's abilities are not those of laziness and dependence which whites attributed to slaves. Instead his skills define him as an innovative, self-reliant person in whom Denver can take pride. Baby Suggs selectively chooses the information she conveys to Denver, thereby demonstrating her understanding of the necessity of transmitting African-American values and beliefs to succeeding generations.

In addition to information about Denver's father, Grandma Baby also tells her granddaughter to enjoy her body and ignore anyone who criticizes her for it. Denver remembers her grandmother explaining to her that slavery was an inhuman condition forcing people to reproduce without enjoying sex. Baby Suggs tells her:

Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to

please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down. She said for me not to listen to all that. That I should always listen to my body and love it. (209)

Here again, Baby Suggs is able to give Denver positive, ego-building information about her body because Baby Suggs has come to terms with her own sexual history within the context of slavery. Sethe, however, is debilitated by her memories of sexual exploitation under slavery, and thus she is unable to give Denver good advice about sexuality.

Even after Baby Suggs dies, Denver draws strength from her. Denver relies on the voice of Baby Suggs when she is trying to decide how to save her family and herself. Baby Suggs inspires Denver's move toward self-preservation when Sethe's unemployment and total subservience to the whims of Beloved forces them to the brink of starvation. Denver carries on a conversation with the spirit of Baby Suggs:

"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? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my."

But you said there was no defense.

"There ain't."

Then what do I do?

"Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." (244)

Baby Suggs' advice reminds Denver of her debt to the African-American community and helps her realize that the only way to pay the debt she owes is to act independently of her mother and to participate in the community beyond the yard.

When Denver leaves 124 in search of help, she goes to the home of Miss Lady Jones, where for a short while she attended school. Miss Jones is "mixed" and runs a make-shift school. "Her light skin got her picked for a colored girls' normal school in Pennsylvania and she paid it back by teaching the unpicked" (247). It is fitting that Denver, marginalized by her mother's isolation, should go to another marginalized person for help. Lady Jones, however, transforms her marginalization through community service. In the role of educator, Lady Jones empowers blacks to preserve their history orally and in writing. Denver's connection to Lady Jones not only suggests that Denver is another marginalized person who can transform through community, but their connection suggests literacy as a mode of freedom. Literacy becomes a metaphor for escaping isolation.

Escaping to freedom through literacy is a major theme of most slave narratives. Both Linda Brent and Frederick Douglass used their literacy to outwit their masters and escape slavery. Douglass steals papers that help him pass as a free black. Brent writes letters and has a friend in New York post them so that Dr. Flint is confused about her whereabouts and cannot recapture her before she actually

makes her escape.¹ Literacy is so central to the slave narrative that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has written extensively on "the trope of the talking book," which refers to the experience each slave who writes or tells a narrative has when she or he first encounters another person reading a book. An example of this trope that is particularly relevant for our discussion of Denver's literacy cites the anguish of a slave who opened a book before he could read only to discover that it would not speak to him (Gates 136).

The slave thought that the book would not speak to him because he was unworthy of its speech. Likewise, Denver learns to read but goes mute soon after because another child in the class asks her if she were jailed along with her mother for the baby killing. The question drives Denver into a world of silence because the stigma of being her mother's daughter causes her to see herself as an outsider--a person not worthy of joining her classmates in the pursuit of literacy. Denver's escape from her non-institutionalized, but "interior," slavery is marked by her return to the place where she felt she had a unique identity--the classroom.

¹ See The Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave written by Himself (ed. Benjamin Quarles, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960) and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl written by Herself (ed. Jean Fagan Yellin, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1987) for further information on these writers' escapes.

In Morrison's neo-slave narrative Denver's literacy becomes a metaphor for communication with others in the black community. Miss Jones treats Denver kindly, as if she is a member of her community rather than on the fringes of it. Miss Jones shows sympathy for Denver by saying, "Oh, baby." Denver "did not know it then, but it was the word 'baby,' said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman" (248). This treatment gives Denver the courage to ask for help, and in doing so she "tells" her story. Up to now, Denver has only told the story of her birth. Everything else about her life she knew and her mother knew, so there was no need for "telling." When Beloved appears, Denver, prodded by Beloved, tells the story of her birth and is symbolically reborn by recreating her entrance into the world. Likewise, when Denver must describe her desperate living situation to Miss Jones, she is establishing herself as worthy of the role of "teller." By allowing herself to communicate her story, she is also breaking free of the constraining psychology of her mother-daughter relationship and creating an identity of her own.

In the act of telling her story, Denver asserts her identity and communicates with the whole town because her story travels through the community. Denver's self is told and represented and shared. Her move to share her story saves her family because even those who resented her mother for being "too proud" to ask for help are willing to aid Denver precisely because she does ask for assistance. The

community decides that "the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course" (249). Denver reaffirms their identities as members of a community by allowing them to help rescue her.

The women of the community begin to leave food for Denver with notes on the dishes identifying the donor. The labels represent another link between Denver and the community because once an offering loses its anonymity Denver must return the sign (the dish) and acknowledge the assistance it conveyed. Consequently, Denver's life outside her home improves, but the situation at 124 worsens, and she realizes that unless she goes to work "there would be no one to save, no one to come home to and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252).

Finally, Denver's courtesy and obvious need coupled with her telling of her story generate enough community sympathy that the neighborhood women converge on 124 to see for themselves what ails the place. In this climatic scene, Denver makes the final separation from her mother and fully enters the community. Denver already feels part of the community before this final break; she waves to the women as they arrive because she knows them even though their appearance puzzles her. Denver is strengthened by her ties to the women and the prospect of self-sufficiency supplied by her new job.

Sethe, however, has an adverse reaction to the women's presence. Struck with the memory of schoolteacher and the

slave catcher, Sethe attempts to reenact her prior messianic scene during which she killed her baby girl; however, this time she attempts to kill the white man, Mr. Bodwin, who has come to take Denver to her job. Denver realizes what is happening and prevents her mother from murdering him. This restraining action represents Denver's choice of community values over Sethe's values of the outraged mother. At the same time that Sethe's attempted murder is an assertion of her own individuality independent of community, Denver's action establishes her identity as an individual within community. Finally, Morrison offers Denver's emergence as an individual whose identity exists within community as a positive alternative to Sethe's isolation and stunted identity.

Although Sethe may or may not gain control over her body and history, it is clear that Denver's story is about the possibility of re-establishing a black woman's authority over the body of black women's history. Sethe's identity is not fully developed; she insists on maintaining her role as outraged mother. This role serves her during her slave and fugitive days because it inspires her to rebel against her condition. Nevertheless, her courageous resistance causes her isolation from community because as a slave woman she must challenge the authority of the slavemaster and the fugitive slave laws alone. Sethe's identity as outraged mother is a response to the authority of the slaveholder; she has no authority of her own unless she is in the act of

challenging the master's authority. Thus, her identity as outraged mother is predicated upon someone else's power rather than her own.

Similarly, upon the return of Beloved, Sethe's identity as outraged mother resurfaces because Beloved reminds her of her powerlessness and deprivation under slavery. She engages in a preoedipal fantasy with Beloved in order to re-experience the mothering that both she and Beloved missed due to slavery. Revising the mother-daughter bond is also a way for Sethe to revise her history. Her relationship with Beloved is attempt to erase the act of resistance that separated her from her daughter. The authority Sethe establishes in her co-dependence with Beloved is like the authority she establishes by resisting schoolteacher because both expressions of authority are responses to her lack of authority under slavery.

Sethe cannot develop an identity beyond the outraged mother because she fails to establish her authority as a free black woman in the post-slavery community. If Sethe could tell the story of her slave past, become the "author" of her own narrative, then she could begin to create an identity within community. Just as the preoedipal infant begins to create an identity during periods of separation from the mother, Sethe might begin to create a post-slavery identity if she steps outside her past to tell her story to the community, instead of reliving it in her memory, or revising it in her relationship with Beloved.

Sethe resists separation from Beloved, and from her past, because she is stuck in a mode of resistance that served her during slavery and in the role of outraged mother through which she derived her authority. She continues to operate in the outraged mother's mode of resistance that, as Fox-Genovese explains, creates isolation for the black woman. Similarly, Sethe's preoedipal fantasy with Beloved is an isolated enterprise that requires the mirroring of mother and daughter, but it does not require Sethe to participate in the community. Sethe's refusal to contribute her individual story to the larger narrative of the community as a whole keeps her isolated even after slavery is abolished.

Sethe speaks a narrative in Beloved, but it is a narrative of resistance that is inappropriate in non-slavery circumstances where the discourse of the slave system is replaced by the discourse of community. As long as Sethe engages in a discourse of resistance, she will face isolation because the only person she is trying to communicate with and establish authority against is the slaveholder. To gain authority in community, one must share a story rather than deny it. For Sethe, sharing the story of her painful slave past causes her to relive the days when she was not considered human. Reliving the memory of her powerlessness in slavery is less desirable to her than creating a fantasy of authority in which she continues to resist the power of the slaveholder. Instead of creating her own voice of authority by sharing her story with the community, Sethe

continues to establish authority by battling the authority of the slaveholder.

The alternative identity and authority that Morrison creates in Denver symbolizes the possibilities for African-American women in the new discourse of African-American community. Denver's emergence into community occurs through her telling of her story. Denver becomes an author, creatively selecting and assembling various bits of information to form a narrative. Her authority leads to her identity as an individual within community.

Similarly, Toni Morrison's creation of the neo-slave narrative Beloved establishes her authority as a member of the community of African-American slave narrators. Beloved is a continuation, revision, and reclamation of the nineteenth-century slave narratives by black women. Like her character, Denver, Morrison draws her courage from her ancestors. And like Denver, she creates a positive black female identity for herself by participating in the American community as a storyteller.

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