ABSTRACT

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NTUISM: HOW TONI MORRISON RECONNECTS US TO ANCESTRAL AFRICA in *BELOVED*

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This study examines Toni Morrison's use of specific Africanisms in *Beloved.* The term Ntu indicates a particular ethos that can be categorized and applied to a reading of this diasporic novel. Morrison uses Ntuism to invoke the names of those Africans lost as a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

This study initiated from two epigraphs at the novel's beginning: "sixty million and more" and a biblical quote, "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved." The epigraphs led to the work of historian Jahnheiz Jahn, who studied, Kagame, Ogotommêli and Tempels in the early 1960s. All four historians expounded and systematized the philosophy of the Bantu, the Ruandese, and the Dogon. While their work is not exhaustive, it is comprehensive in that it considers cultures from different areas of Africa and focuses on outstanding commonalities. From those commonalities comes the term Ntu, which is used herein to indicate significant African cosmological tropes. This study applies Ntu as a theoretical tool supporting my assertion that *Beloved* should be read as an Africanist novel in order to fully appreciate its depth, complexity and weight within the American literary canon.

NTUISM: HOW TONI MORRISON RECONNECTS US TO ANCESTRAL AFRICA in *BELOVED*

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The age-old time return, the rediscovered unity... ~Leopold Sedar Senghor

It is one thing for a race to produce artistic material; it is quite another thing for it to produce the ability to interpret and criticize this material. ~W.E.B.DuBois (1925)

INTRODUCTION

Until very recently, many critics measured Toni Morrison and her work against established Western conventions. The consistent attempt to do so underscores a lack of attention given to African cultural history and to how authors like Morrison import that cultural history in their storytelling. It appears that many critics and academics, in general, assume that the African creative mind began its most developed expression once it was introduced to European models. Rarely, within canonical arguments do we find detailed or accurate valuations of African cultural histories. Contrarily, much discussion of Africanisms in literature has focused on the African in relation to his/her colonizer, whether French, Anglo, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, or Italian. The route to the African mind takes a detour through the European mind. Many academics first categorized the African mind as primarily mimetic or primarily primitive, or primarily mystical and above all, unworthy of critical analysis. Western academics often dismiss the African mind, a long history establishes this fact. Take for instance Georg Wilhelm Hegel's commentary in his Philosophy of History, published in 1854. "Africa is not an historical continent; it shows neither change nor development and whatever may have

developed there belongs to the world of Asia and of Europe" (qtd in Brown 11). Philosopher David Hume proclaimed nearly one hundred years prior that Africans "have no indigenous manufacturers among them, no arts, no sciences." And as late as 1961, Oxford professor of history, Hugh Trevor Roper said, "At present there is no African history: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness"(qtd in Brown 11). Now, if these racist, uninformed and dismissive attitudes continued to fester among Europe's educated elite late into the twentieth century, then surely we might conclude that Western academia may have neglected comprehensive study of African cultural history until that time and afterward.

Considering this fact in its totality, fast forward to the late seventies and early eighties when authors like Toni Morrison began publishing novels replete with Africanisms. How do we read and understand Toni Morrison's work without taking care to appreciate the culture from which she springs? We must first accept and understand that a deep cultural history exists and influences every aspect of her novels.

Critics have often looked at Morrison's work and its applicability to established literary paradigms. Is she poststructuralist, postmodernist, feminist, new historicist, deconstructionist, essentialist? While we may analyze her works with reference to any of these categories, Morrison's literary identity ultimately must be delimited, wrought out of western constructs, and analyzed according to the culture that primarily informs her.

In 1993, Barbara Christian published an article, "Fixing Methodologies", where She called for an engagement with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as an African text, not an Afrocentric text whereby an African chauvinism takes the main stage, but rather a text infused with African cosmological structures about which Western academia showed

little knowledge and little interest. Furthermore, while the novel received unbounded critical acclaim and catapulted Morrison into literary categories hitherto not achieved (the receipt of the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1987 and the Nobel Prize in 1993) by African-American writers, much analysis and criticism of the novel ignored the matrix of culture from which Morrison drew to create *Beloved. In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison writes,

> As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work not to see this. (17)

It is my assertion that to ignore, diminish or otherwise refuse the influence of the African mind on Morrison's literature, is to ignore, diminish, and otherwise refuse Morrison's personal Africanism. It is to consider her strictly as an American artist, from Lorraine, Ohio; plain, devoid of African culture, molded almost exclusively by the African experience in America which is new, fresh, individualized, constantly reinventing itself and unchained to the past. On this point Morrison says, "We are innocent. The American dream is innocence and clean slates and the future. Don't dwell on the old country or the mother tongue...That impulse has informed a great deal of the literature of this country" (qtd in Horn 75). Arguably present within the current paradigm is an underlying wave of devaluing racism that must rely upon a great deal of hard work not to see. Morrison points out in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" that racism is an

academic pursuit, supported by whom, what and how the academy chooses to study: "Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature and range... is the clash of cultures" (3). Both Morrison and Christian make the case that what is not said is as powerful as what is said. Morrison says that too often,

> When matters of race are located and called attention to in American literature, critical response has tended to be on the order of humanistic nostrum—or a dismissal mandated by the label "political." Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly. I think of this erasure as a kind of trembling hypochondria always curing itself with unnecessary surgery. A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only "universal" but also "race-free" risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist. (*Playing in the Dark* 12)

Initial criticism tended to minimize, ignore and devalue Morrison's racial identity and its influence upon her work. Barbara Christian iterates the fact that much of the criticism surrounding Morrison and particularly *Beloved* relies almost exclusively on Western interpretations and Western paradigms. She suggests that this exclusionary kind of critical attention has "blunted" the power of this novel as a specifically American text reliant upon African informants (363). Those informants emblazon *Beloved*'s narrative and enable its immediacy. The novel speaks in a loud, lively voice that impacts the reader profoundly. The novel bears a weight brought on by layer upon layer of meaning and complexity. African voices murmur and scream beneath this text in a manner indicative of the stammer heard by Stamp Paid as he approaches 124 Bluestone Rd.

to make amends to Sethe following his judgmental intrusion into her life. *Beloved* becomes a communal engagement immediately experienced by all of its readers.

Upon completing the novel many readers express an accurate summation: it is a novel about a ghost child returned to haunt an escaped slave woman guilty of infanticide. That is how I first read the novel and its power, even at that point, was stunning. But after reading the novel again, I was immediately struck by the subtextual intricacies which, because of my earlier lack of cultural and intellectual exposure and understanding, had simply missed. It is more apparent now that busy African fingers work to weave the rich fabric of this psychologically, socially, sexually, racially and metaphysically complex tale of a particular historical experience. Apparent now like the African griot and ancient scribe endowed with the gift for and trusted with the responsibility of carrying, understanding and transmitting the cultural history of a people, Toni Morrison engages *Beloved*'s reader with an Africanist text that is, at once, transcendent and immutable. The novel is not what it at first seems. When we decipher meaning based on African models, the identity of the ghost child morphs; the slave woman becomes an historical icon. The community in which they reside comes to life. The private tragic story (which is based on the real events in the life of Margaret Garner) becomes the conduit for understanding and beginning the process of healing the psychic pain of an entire people. In "Fixing Methodologies" Barbara Christian asks,

> What does it mean when... millions of African-Americans in the New World are cut off from their 'living dead' and cannot know their names and thus cannot remember them? In not being able to remember, name and feed those who passed on in the Middle Passage, those who survived

> had to abandon their living dead to the worst possible fate that could befall a West African: complete annihilation. (368-369)

Toni Morrison wishes to recover and repair the lost link to West Africans who died during the Middle Passage. An epigraph at the novel's beginning reads "sixty million and more." The following page quotes Romans 9:25, "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved." These epigraphs reveal Morrison's intent in writing this novel. In a manner similar to Milkman from *Song of Solomon*, Morrison embarks on an excavation and reclamation tour. Led by an obscure and bastardized song sung by his peculiar aunt, Pilate, Milkman becomes a geneologist and archeologist on a quest to reclaim and honor his forgotten ancestors. Not only does he eventually claim their literal bones, he also claims their songs and learns which were authentic and which were not. Similarly, Morrison seeks literarily to reclaim and honor those "sixty million or more" African ancestors who died during the Middle Passage. She will resurrect them for those who have forgotten, calling them beloved, though they have long been unnamed and relegated to historical obscurity. They are the dead, often murdered, victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Historian John Mbiti reveals a key fact as to the collective ramifications of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, saying that to the African "to die immediately is a tragedy, that must be avoided at all costs" (*African Religions* 208). Appreciating this fact, as Morrison clearly does, the novel thus becomes an invocation aimed at calling forth the anxious souls of those lost during one of history's greatest tragedies. *Beloved* is a fixing ceremony. It is a walk to Baby Suggs' Clearing. This engagement is not an easy process. It is painful, though necessary for communal healing. And as Amy Denver says when

massaging Sethe's battered, swollen feet, "It's gonna hurt,... Anything coming back to life hurts" (35). Consequentially, in writing such a novel, Toni Morrison takes on a role not usually witnessed in Western literary experiences. She becomes the voice of an entire people, exorcising their pain with her words. She calls forth the ghostly and regrettable history of African people, particularly those descendents of slaves in America. She invokes their names and acknowledges those ignored and forgotten by a country wanting to dismiss and gloss over this crucial point in American history. She gives value to their lives. She gives "blood to the scraps".

Readers and critics have very recently begun to consider Toni Morrison in a tradition of those African storytellers, including Egyptian scribes and West African griots. These storytellers consistently rely upon the appropriation of culturally specific tropological informants as Jane Campbell asserts to "bridge gaps between supernatural and 'real' myth and history"(xii). Campbell cites Toni Morrison among those African-American writers who achieve this end. Morrison, however, has presented the academy with a problem. How do we fully analyze and appreciate the work of an artist whose culture has been so belittled by the West and western academies in particular? How do we bridge the gap that exists between the well from which this artist draws and the well from which the traditionally established critic draws? More than likely, we begin to listen with sincerity to those voices that have hitherto been devalued and marginalized; bluntly dismissed as racially obsessed or hysterical.

More comprehensive analysis has begun and more is sure to come, but strikingly not present in much previous discussion around the novel is a presentation of specific answers to the question presented by Christian. How does *Beloved* express an

underlying African cosmology? In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken", Morrison comments on what she sees as intellectually dishonest attention given African-American literature (including her own), saying that serious criticism must develop "...a theory of literature that truly accommodates Afro-American literature: one that is based on its culture, its history, and the artistic strategies the works employ to negotiate the world it inhabits" (11). Theorists must consider the African cosmological structures that inform a great deal of African-diasporic literature. Some have done so. A brilliant example can be found in Henry Louis Gates's seminal work, *The Signifying Monkey*, published in 1989. Gates ties the work of diasporic writers to the traditions of their forbearers. In the introductory chapter he says,

> The black Africans who survived the dreaded 'Middle Passage' from the west coast of Africa to the New World did not sail alone. Violently and radically abstracted from their civilizations, these Africans nevertheless carried within them to the Western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will, not to forget: their music (a mnemonic device for Bantu and Kwa tonal languages), their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order, and their forms of performance. If 'the Dixie Pike,' as Jean Toomer put the matter in *Cane*, 'has grown from a goat path in Africa,' then the black vernacular tradition stands as its signpost, at that liminal crossroads of culture contact and ensuing difference at which Africa meets Afro-America. (3-4)

In *Black Literature and Literary Theory* Henry Louis Gates draws lines directly from

African folk tradition and African diasporic cultural expression. Particularly, he makes clear what he acknowledges as the link between African trickster tales and the act of "signifying", both literally and literarily. While he begins in Africa, he extends his thesis in a Pan-Africanist direction. Gates finally and primarily focuses on African-American cultural expression.

Within the first three chapters of Gates' critical text lie 1) specific references to the trickster tales of several African oral traditions and mythologies 2) an explanation of how that character expresses itself in African-American cultural tradition and 3) an offering of his theory regarding the act of signifying within a literary context.

The trickster, more formally identified by Gates as Esu of the Yoruba, appears in mythology and oral traditions throughout the Pan-African world. He is associated with the monkey in several cultures and always bears the brunt of truth and divination in his paradoxical and oftentimes comically ironic expressions. In Yoruba culture, Esu is said to be the "path to Ifa" (Gates 10). Ifa, is that culture's sacred text, like the *Bible* to the Christian, or the *Metu Neter* to one who practices Maat. Esu, in other words and according to Gates, is the path to understanding that which is inscribed within the culture. It is the key to interpreting the word and in this case that word is the literary cultural history of African people. In Fon tradition, he appears as Legba and in Afro-Cuban tradition he is Elegbara. He is often described as an intermediary between this world and the next (27). Gates argues that in African-American culture Esu and Legba appear rhetorically in the act of signifying.

The signifying monkey is an element of black vernacular. It is located in the speech and word play found in all aspects of the culture. It is a tradition with firm

footing in the American experience. Linguist Geneva Smitherman posits that signifying has eight main components: 1) indirection or circumlocution 2) metaphoric-imagistic 3) humorous, ironic 4) rhythmic fluency and sound 5) teachy but not preachy 6) directed at a person present in situational context 7) punning 8) introduction of semantically or logically unexpected (qtd in Gates 94).

By offering such a theory for reading African-American literature, Gates suggests soundly that traditional (Western) paradigms for literary valuation cannot exclusively be ascribed to African-American literature. We need to have a theory that recognizes those tropes which hitherto have often been minimized as possible retentions from African cultural roots, but have not been focused on as the loci from which artistic expressions spring.

We can see this as historically true as evidenced by critiques of African-American literature. A great deal of the early criticism of *Beloved* drew almost exclusively from established paradigms. To our benefit, literary critics such as Gates certainly recognize that there is a history and a sound culture that is imbedded in every aspect of African-American life. Much of it is retained oral, mythological, and metaphysical knowledge. It is that knowledge that should inform the reader and writer of African-American texts. Gates makes a serious effort to academically initiate the action later called for by Barbara Christian. He did so as early as 1989, in *The Signifying Monkey*. Yet, we saw no groundswell of African influenced literary criticism. It has been slow to develop and as a result, specifically African, pointed arguments have been hard to find. Logically, much as one would look to European cultural tropes to divine obvious and sub textual meaning within the works of Flannery O'Connor or Henry James, the same must be done to

decipher meaning in the texts of Africanist writers. Africa is the source of the people and their culture, which while uniquely American, is nevertheless deeply rooted in Africa. Gates soldifies his argument:

> Common sense, in retrospect, argues that these retained elements of culture should have survived, that their complete annihilation would have been far more remarkable than their preservation. The African, after all, was a traveler, albeit an abrupt, ironic traveler, through space and time; and like every traveler, the African 'read' a new environment within a received framework of meaning and belief. The notion that the Middle Passage was so traumatic that it functioned to create in the African a tabula rasa of consciousness is as odd as it is a fiction, a fiction that has served several economic orders and their attendant ideologies. The full erasure of traces of cultures as splendid, as ancient, and as shared by the slave traveler as the classic cultures of traditional West Africa would have been extraordinarily difficult. (4)

Gates's negation of the idea of the slave community as having a collective tabula rasa shores up Morrison's statement concerning the absence of reality-based investigations of the institution of slavery:

> "The slave museums in this country are very upbeat and cute. It's all about quilts that the slaves made and costumes in Williamsburg. And it has all been sort of whitewashed, along with other things in the history of this country, because we don't dwell on history as it was..." (qtd in Horn 75).

American slavery remains a subject to be avoided within the culture. Its realities appear too much to handle. It is much easier to forward the American dialectic by not dwelling on the shame of the past. Thoughts of the "peculiar institution" incite feelings of guilt and shame for both white and black Americans. That guilt and shame would increase exponentially if white Americans appreciated in even miniscule degrees the cultures and world views of those African people they treated like non-humans for centuries. *Beloved*, as a text, insists that we must exorcise those feelings of guilt and shame first by looking at history realistically, irrespective of how pained and hurt we may feel. It also insists that we must recognize the value of all human cultures by learning who people are and what they believe. Not learning or even acknowledging the African cultural roots of authors like Toni Morrison diminishes comprehensive understanding of her works. Morrison is like the African traveler who Gates calls an "ironic traveler through space and time" who "read a new environment within a received framework of meaning" (4). While abstracted from Africa physically, she imports Africa into the center of her artistic expression. This study attempts to outline some specifics of how Africa informs *Beloved*.

Ntuism (pronounced "in-to-ism") is a key element of African cosmology. The term Ntu comes from the Bantu people of Central Africa and stands for essence. The concept of Ntu, which exemplifies fundamental African philosophy, conveys that there is a spiritual essence that underlies and incorporates all material phenomena. The quality of "the unity (Ntu, Vital Force, etc.) is, by nature, positive, common to all persons, and serves to unite individuals with one another and with everything else in the universe"(Nobles 89). Janheinz Jahn says,

> Ntu is Being itself, the cosmic universal force, which only modern,

> rationalizing thought can abstract from its manifestations... It is a force manifesting itself in man, beast, thing, place, time, beauty, ugliness, laughter, tears, so on... Force and matter are not being united in this conception; on the contrary, they have never been apart... (They) act continually and are constantly effective" (as forces). (101)

Morrison's novel reflects Ntu's tenets. In *Beloved*, Morrison relies on the African concept of Ntu to reconnect her readers and characters to an acknowledged, but hitherto unnamed African past. She uses four of Ntu's main components: Muntu (human beings), Hantu (place and time), and Kintu (things) to reconnect her readers and characters to those "60 million or more" beloved African ancestors lost as a direct result of the Middle Passage. She performs a sort of fixing ceremony: reconstructing a lost link between the present and the past. She does so through her characters and their experiences with each other, their experiences with themselves and their experiences with their environment.

The following chapters fall in order according to their ascertained weight within *Beloved*. Muntu, the first chapter focuses on the Ntu concept of Muntu, or Man. Three sets of two characters fall within three main categories of Muntu: Denver and Paul D (living human Muntu), Baby Suggs and Halle (deified ancestor Muntu), and Sethe and Beloved (amalgamated Muntu).

Chapter two focuses on Ntu's Kintu, or thing. Morrison uses three items in particular to reconnect us to Africa. She endows her characters with the ability to connect to their personal and collective history via a tobacco tin, a tree named brother, and a chokecherry tree on Sethe's back. Hantu is next. Hantu considers the Ntu driven

co-mingling of time and space. Neither time nor space exists on a linear plane and Morrison uses this concept to help drive the narrative. Hantu connects the past with the present. This discussion concludes with a look at the significance of Morrison's use of Ntu in the construction of the narrative.

CHAPTER 1

MUNTU—MAN: LIVING HUMAN, AMALGAMATED, AND DEIFIED ANCESTORS

> Muntu embraces the living and dead, ancestors and deified. The unity expressed by the inclusive concept of Muntu is one of the characteristics of African culture, and further peculiarities are derived from it. Jahnheinz Jahn Muntu: *African Culture and the Western World*

Central to Ntu is Muntu, man. Muntu is a term commonly found in several African languages, it has Bantu origins. The term Muntu not only focuses on humans as physical beings, but also accommodates the collective consciousness of African people. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison draws heavily from this concept in creating compound and even amalgamated characters symbolic of the African sense of a human-based, ancestor focused, collective community. Doing so, she ties the novel's characters and readers to an ancestral past. Muntu can be loosely translated as "we," but moreover includes living people, ancestors, deified ancestors and gods. Because Muntu embraces not only living beings but also ancestors, deified ancestors and gods, certain characteristics arise as points worthy of further discussion.

Muntu is a central component of *Beloved* and we can categorize the novel's main characters according to their status as Muntu. We should be able to classify each member of the community while looking at her/him as part of a whole, remembering that within

African culture, individual identity is most commonly derived from a communal identity. The individual is never considered apart from the community as a whole. Consequently, the needs of the whole take priority over the needs of the individual. Historian John Mbiti offers that "community is above the individual" (qtd in Zauditu 5). While each individual struggles with the barbarism of slavery and the chaos in which it festers, never do we find within the novel a complete dissolution of the African concept of community, Muntu is always present. The conscience of the community overrides the conscience of the individual. We can call all of her characters Muntu simply because of their progeny. They fall within Muntu's various categories, however, based on their behavior toward their community. For example, Baby Suggs and her son Halle work in accordance with Ntu's framework and are raised to the level of deified ancestor. Other characters fall elsewhere.

Within Muntu's framework of living individuals, ancestors, deified ancestors and gods, we can easily fit the novel's main characters. Denver, Paul D, Sethe, Baby Suggs, Halle and Beloved function as Muntu within Morrison's text. The story unfolds through Sethe's flashbacks and other first person limited perspectives. Several characters move from one category of Muntu to another. At some point in the novel, each character resides in the realm of concrete material; that of living human beings. Denver and Paul D remain there throughout, though they both interact with Muntu of a different category. Contrarily, Baby Suggs and her son Halle transition and become ancestral characters. Baby Suggs and Halle are elevated to deified ancestor status, because of their deeds toward the betterment of the community while living. Sethe and Beloved become unique entities altogether.

Individual hubris and collective anguish, respectively, help to create these two characters who express most poignantly the African experience with slavery in America. According to the concept of Ntu and because they are children of Africa, both are innately Muntu. American slavery transforms them. They cannot express Muntu in a strictly African cosmological sense in America. Sethe struggles because of her choice to commit infanticide, followed by her expression of self-righteousness and stubborn pride. Beloved, on one level, makes the choice to seek revenge upon Sethe, thereby alienating herself as a threat to the community. Beloved, therefore, must be destroyed. On another level, when looking at Beloved as a representative of the dead and unnamed Africans lost during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, she becomes the force of Muntu which must be reckoned with in order for the community to move forward.

Beloved and Sethe suffer most from their experience in America because they are isolated. Their own survival and immediate needs become their priority. They, like millions of Africans before and after, become something new, forged by the brutal meeting between Africa and America. They suffer more because they are abstracted from Africa and act individualistically. Denver, Halle, Baby Suggs, and Paul D offer another perspective altogether. They act and react differently within their community of Muntu. Most significantly, however, Morrison calls on the songs of each of these characters to compose a rich symphony brimming with historical and cultural accuracies.

The Living Human Muntu: Denver and Paul D

As a character, Denver represents the Americanized descendent of a lost African. She is named after a white woman who shares a surname with the former governor of the Kansas Territory, James W. Denver. Ironically, James W. Denver acted as a key

participant on the "free-state" side of the Lecompton Constitutional Convention of 1858. At the convention, the territory of "bloody Kansas" voted on whether to ratify a proslavery constitution. The Dred Scott Decision, which generally stated that a black man has no rights which a white man is inclined to respect (thus allowing for the denial of Dred Scott's request for freedom), prompted the debate in "bleeding Kansas." Many argue that on a larger scale the Dred Scott decision eventually led to the Civil War. Yet on a smaller scale, and more relevant to *Beloved*, the Dred Scott decision eventually led to schoolteacher's journey into Ohio to retrieve Sethe and her children following their escape from Sweet Home. The bloody sequence at 124 Bluestone Rd. ensued. Denver survived and stayed with Sethe. Denver then becomes a battleground as the crossroad between the Muntu's experience with the past and the future. She is the intersection of past and future; slavery and freedom; isolation and inclusion.

Denver is left with the task of meeting the challenges of her family life and reconnecting to the community that can sustain her. She will eventually confront the past, recognizing Beloved as a threat to herself and Sethe. She will inevitably choose to leave behind the pain of the past, represented by Beloved, and ask the women of the community for help.

Denver is Sethe's only remaining child and therefore the one left with the challenge of reconnecting to the community which has rejected and been rejected by the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Rd. Denver is the only character with no recollection of slavery and must be tied to it through others' memory revealed through oral revelation. She expresses a hunger for knowledge of the past: "Closed off from the hurt of the hurt world, Denver's imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly

needed because loneliness wore her out" (28-29). She revels in the story of how Amy Denver helped deliver her in a boat as Sethe crossed the Ohio River into freedom, her own birth a symbol of forward progress toward freedom. She has the only experience outside the confines of physical slavery and acts as the tie to hope for a free future. Denver works as a conduit throughout the novel. She is Muntu of the living human variety whose personal struggle with alienation reflects the struggle of an entire people to leave the isolation of the present and reconnect to their ancestral past. First, Denver reconciles her relationships with Sethe and Beloved and then, the other Muntu within the community. She reconnects to her community and its collective story. She does so in order to survive.

Beloved, the angered, rapacious representative of the dead and neglected ancestors, begins the process of devouring Sethe, unchecked. Sethe, seemingly mesmerized by guilt and longing, allows Beloved to take everything for herself, even Sethe's food. As Beloved grows, Sethe diminishes. "Re-memory" laiden with guilt, shame, violence, hunger and neglect entangle them in a destructive dance that can only end with Sethe dead. Denver, recognizing this as fact, and herself no longer entranced by Beloved's mystery, chooses to save her mother. She does so by putting aside the pride that had locked the doors to 124 Bluestone Rd. She first enlists Stamp Paid. He then enlists the women of the community who come because they are needed. They come also because their community of living Muntu needs them. Denver was a member of that community before Sethe murdered Beloved. In order to regain her place within that community, Denver first has to ask for help. And following Ntu's tenets, her Muntu community very willingly responds.

Loneliness ate at Denver long before the past entered 124 Bluestone Rd. "She missed her brothers...And Baby Suggs telling her things in the keeping room" (19). By the time Paul D and Beloved arrived, Denver's isolation with Sethe and the rumbling house was complete. She had no friends and walked out only as far as her yard's edge. She had a connection only to Sethe and her memory of her experiences with Howard, Buglar, and Baby Suggs. But that changed once Paul D arrived. While he posed a threat to her enmeshed relationship with Sethe, he also provided some normalcy and outlet to the community. All three spoke to others within the community along their way to the fair. They acted socially appropriately and as a part of the circle from which they previously felt so much alienation and judgment.

Beloved rose from the creek shortly thereafter. Her presence provided an outlet for Denver and a link by which she could establish a connection to the other living human Muntu within her community. Denver acted with commitment to immediately engaging her need to love and nurture. She nursed Beloved in secret, but then the relationship transformed. And as Denver's relationship with Beloved changed (Beloved fixed on consuming Sethe), so did her relationship to the community that surrounded them. Her relationship to the community corresponded to her relationship with Beloved. Beloved, a Muntu representing the pain and mystery of Denver's past, became a tangible threat to the survival of Denver's only remaining family, Sethe. This fact invariably threatened Denver's own survival and eventually led her to walk out of the yard alone and into the community of Muntu. Her isolation ended and the community whose judgment Denver so feared encouraged and embraced her. Through that one act, Denver reconnected. The two strangers who entered 124 Bluestone Rd. transformed Denver's relationship to the

Muntu. Her experience with Paul D and Beloved above all, gave her a chance at life free from the loneliness that previously plagued her.

Paul D also resides in the house of the living human Muntu. He never leaves that realm. Like Denver, he represents hope for a future in freedom. As a male, however, he is presented with special challenges to overcoming the obstacles to self-realization. Morrison points directly to this fact through his name. He is one among several Pauls within the novel. Three Pauls live at Sweet Home. How can this Paul distinguish himself? What are the obstacles to his self-actualization? Even after Sweet Home, physicality plagues Paul D; first his feet, then his sense of "home" and place.

As a living human, bound by materialisms, Paul D cannot truly connect with himself, the women in his life, or his community until he first reconciles himself with his inability to control his physical self. Paul D's destabilized physicality betrays his innate desire for constancy, poignantly highlighting the true nature of American slavery: while it is the body which is first and most immediately impacted by conscription, the ramifications of the peculiar institution run much deeper. Slavery accosted the psyche, leaving it torn, fractured and un-tethered. This can be said for Paul D and the entire community he represents. Morrison points to this fact through Paul D. He can never physically rest, even in Sethe's home. He walks from Sweet Home (ironically named so) to Alfred, Georgia to 124 Bluestone Rd. and inevitably to himself and to his Muntu community.

At the novel's beginning, we first encounter Paul D as a weary traveler. He simply walks up to 124 Bluestone Road and sits down, waiting for Sethe. The condition of Paul D's feet, made clear by his exchange with Sethe, speaks loudly concerning his

disposition:

> "Eighteen years," she said softly.
>
> "Eighteen," he repeated. "And I swear I been walking every one of em. Mind if I join you?" He nodded toward her feet and began unlacing his shoes.
>
> "You want to soak them? Let me get you a basin of water." She moved closer to him to enter the house.
>
> "No, uh uh. Can't baby feet. A whole lot more tramping they got to do yet." (7)

Paul D and Sethe have not seen each other in eighteen years and their first words make known one major commonality between them. They stand together fatigued by what Baby Suggs calls "the nastiness of life." For Paul D, that nastiness insisted he move from one locale to another, not ever settling into any sort of familiarity or comfort. His escape from slavery at Sweet Home meant that he had to keep running to stay free from the demons who would bound and keep his body, like they had at Sweet Home and at Alfred, Georgia. His constant movement underscores his desire to stay free from the demons of the past. And unless he moves from one place to another psychically, he cannot move forward physically, "tramping" through life. He would be mentally overwhelmed by what he has seen and done and felt. His continued denial of that part of his mind filled with fear, pain and the trauma of constant violence and humiliation keep him from realizing profound and transformative relationships with those he previously looked to for mere physical sustenance. He symbolically keeps the pain of his reality at bay, locked in the tin that hangs from his neck:

> After Alfred he had shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing. If he could do those things—with a little work and a little sex thrown in—he asked for no more, for more required him to dwell on Halle's face and Sixo laughing.... By the time he got to Ohio, then to Cincinnati, then to Halle Suggs' mother's house, he thought he had seen and felt it all (41).

Something at 124 Bluestone Rd. changed Paul D; he decided to stop. Something made him wish to lay claim to his life and his future. He saw in Sethe and Denver hope. He saw the hope necessary for anyone looking from outside a community wishing to connect to it. Something, besides pain had to be found in order for this particular living human Muntu to stop running. Although Sethe and Denver gave Paul D some value for his life outside his physical self, he first had to look realistically at the past. Stamp Paid forced Paul D to see and acknowledge the violence and trauma of his own past by showing him the news clipping of Sethe's crime. Not until that point, does he realize the true weight of his experience in America. He sees and feels this only once he retreats into isolation physically away from Sethe and Beloved (both of whom he cannot stop sleeping with). Knowledge of Sethe's crime forces a change within Paul D. He ironically retreats to a cellar. There, he is able to contemplate the barbarity that kept his mind and body alienated from all Muntu, including himself. It is the same barbarity Stamp Paid recollects as he walks toward Sethe's door:

> Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped

> by the crew; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing.... Detailed in documents and petitions full of whereas and presented to any legal body who'd read It. It stank. (180)

Thoughts and emotions connected directly to his experience in America had to be reckoned with in order for Paul D to reconcile with himself, then Sethe, then his community of Muntu. He had to integrate his own memory with his present in order to escape his isolation. Only then could he see himself as a part of a community wherein loving and not just having sex with a woman was possible. He could father a young girl and otherwise actualize himself as man. He became willing to look at the obstacles of his past and resolved to run no more. His interaction with Sethe initiated the process. As he watched Sethe move about her yard, "the closed portion of his head opened like a greased lock" (41). Paul D began his transition through his pain, back to himself and to the rest of his community of Muntu. By the novel's end, after a long consideration of all the running and moving he had been forced into, Paul D returns to nurse a wounded and bedridden Sethe back to life. He encourages Sethe toward a future with him, "Sethe,... me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (273). Paul D then settles himself beside Sethe, deciding to run no more. He decides to stay and reclaim his life within his community of Muntu.

Deified Ancestor Muntu: Halle and Baby Suggs

Two characters in *Beloved* reached deified ancestor status: Halle and Baby Suggs. They both followed Ntu's caveat specifically concerning good deeds acted out as a benefit to the community as a whole. Both characters committed grand, magnanimous

acts. As a testament to their elevated status, living Muntu remembered them long after their passing, speaking their names proudly and carrying on in their absence with constant reference to their greatness.

Halle was never physically present in *Beloved*. In fact, Halle is primarily referred to as an ancestor. Also, he is always talked about, but never physically described. And though not ever present, he takes on an instant heroic identity as an absent, but noble son, father and husband. We can look at his name as an indication of his status. Halle is evocative of the word halo (of Christian mythology). Denver calls him "angel man" (208). But also, and more significantly for this argument, Halle evokes the name Haile, as in Selassie: former emperor of Ethiopia. Selassie, though viewed as a tyrant in some quarters, holds an extremely high status among the world's diasporic Africans. Haile Selassie was the last emperor of Ethiopia and stands as an important symbol for the African battle against European imperialism. His reign shortly followed that of his uncle, Menelik the II, who as emperor of Ethiopia, defeated invading Italians at the battle of Adowa, in 1896.

Additionally, Selassie, crowned in 1930, King of Kings, Elect of God, conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah, is viewed as the Messiah among the world's Rastafarians. Halle's name, like Sethe's, holds considerable significance in African cultural history. And Halle's name, like Haile Selassie's, is spoken with reverence among his Muntu descendents. He is long remembered and acknowledged as a benefit to his community. And while his name means something to the reader and author, it is his acts that carry him into the deified ancestor category of Muntu in *Beloved*.

Baby Suggs kept, Halle, "a man God made none sweeter than," longer than any of

her children; twenty years (86). She therefore felt free enough to love him like she had no other. She once says, "A man ain't nothing but a man... But a son? Well, now, that's somebody" (23). In love with his mother, Halle worked on Sundays to buy her freedom. Halle additionally gave Baby Suggs four descendant grandchildren who could remember her and call her name. He also gave her a daughter-in-law who would tend to her upon his own death. The greatest act of kindness Halle showed toward his community was his gift of freedom to Baby Suggs because it amounted to more than a place and time for Baby Suggs to simply sit and take a load off. Halle's gift gave Baby Suggs a chance at fulfilling her desire to preach and love, without reservation, her community of living Muntu.

Baby Suggs's deified ancestor status cannot be questioned. She is deified after death because she treated her community of Muntu with exemplary love and compassion. Once free to love on the north side of the Ohio River, Baby Suggs opened her heart in service to her community, she spoke in pulpits, and nursed the sick. She opened her home and the community poured in "before 124 and everybody in it had closed down, veiled over and shut away; before it had become a plaything of spirits and the home of the chafed, 124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised, and soothed" (86-87). Baby Suggs resigned herself to serving in this way because "slave life had busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue. She had nothing left... but her heart"(87). So she opened her heart and fed an entire community. And while she did all these things from her home at 124 Bluestone Rd., her most notable gifts she gave in the "Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods" (87).

There, Baby Suggs invited her community of Muntu, hidden safely from the cruelties of the world to laugh, cry, dance and love. In the Clearing, Baby Suggs invoked the humanity of those Muntu gathered there listening:

> Here... in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it... You got to love it, you!... then [love] your life holding womb your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart! For this is the prize (88-89).

Baby Suggs, holy, performed "fixing" ceremonies in the Clearing. And so it was to the Clearing that Sethe, at a crossroad, returned to "get a clue from her husband's dead mother as to what she should do with her sword and shield now... " (89). Sethe did not know whether to continue to hold on to her anger, disgust, shame and pride. She used each as a tool of defense against a world that hurt her so. Now, with Beloved and Paul D unquestionably presenting her with her past, she needed advisement on whether to cease fighting. Seeking to know how to move forward, she turns to Baby Suggs. Fittingly, Baby Suggs stands as the ancestor to whom Sethe constantly defers, begging for consultation: "She wished for Baby Suggs' fingers molding her nape, reshaping it, saying... 'lay em down, Sethe, sword and shield'"(86). Ironically, when Sethe attempts to hear the voice of the one she trusts above all others, Baby Suggs, the interaction is interrupted. At this point, Denver witnesses Beloved choking Sethe in the Clearing. Beloved, representing the angered and neglected ancestor, disrupts the potentially nourishing communication between the living Muntu (Sethe), and the informative, deified ancestor (Baby Suggs). On this subject Morrison says,

> "when [s]he cannot [touch] the ancestor (because the ancestor is not there, or because [s]he cannot communicate with him), then and only then is [s]he frustrated, defeated, devastated and unregenerated. When [s]he is able to, [s]he is regenerated, balanced, and capable of operating..." (City Limits 3).

The channel will remain clogged until Sethe, with the help of the other living Muntu within the community, confronts Beloved and settles properly back into place.

The Amalgamated Muntu: Sethe and Beloved

Sethe refuses to rest in the living Muntu category. She changes throughout the novel. She represents the internal and external chaos of slavery. We can first look to Sethe's name as an indication of her constant instability. In order to understand how she fits within a discussion of Muntu in *Beloved*, we must first place her within proper African mythological history. Karla Holloway posits that "mythologies are the reconstructions of memory—the meta-matrix for all usage of language and the primary source of a literature that would recover a historical voice that is at once sensual, visceral, and real "(70).

Toni Morrison realizes the power of myth to recover a historical voice and incorporates African mythology in her reconstruction of African-American memory. Seth (Set, or St) is the Egyptian (Kemetic) god of murder and chaos. He murders his brother Osiris (Auser) in order to garner his birthright. Seth (Set) then scatters Osiris's body to the four corners of the Earth. Osiris's murder marks the beginning of war between Lower (Northern) and Upper (Southern) Egypt. As a mythological figure, Seth also embodies the African concept of dual force because he is often ameliorated as a friend of the dead

and the gateway through which the dead must pass in order to transcend into the world of the immortals. Morrison additionally utilizes the African concept of dual force to feminize "Seth", creating "Sethe". Toni Morrison's Sethe can be likened to Seth (Set), most obviously as a chaotic figure, readied by virtue of passionate desire, to commit murder within her own family. In *Beloved*, Sethe murders her own daughter to keep her from returning to Sweet Home (their former slave home). Her passionate desire, fear and self-righteousness drove her to do so. Sethe, like Seth, defied the conventions of the community in which she lived, but the community in which she lived did not shun her for this. The community rejected Sethe because after murdering her daughter and attempting to murder another, she acted with pride and without shame. She essentially concluded she had the right to kill her children rather than allow them to be taken back to Sweet Home, saying, "It worked....They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em" (164-165). Laying claim to her childrens' lives and acting with precision, she kills the youngest with what she sees as justifiable reason, and without too much regret. And in a community in Ohio undoubtedly steeped in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and arguably influenced by an African consciousness, she has defied the laws of society, God and Nature. E.N. Mujynya writes,

> In the world of Ntu, actions thought favorable to the blossoming of life, capable of conserving and protecting life, of making it flower and increasing the vital potential of the community are, for these reasons, considered good. On the other hand, any act thought prejudicial to the life of the individual or of the community is judged evil, even where it only attacks the material interests of persons, physical or moral ... To

> understand this attitude, it is necessary to bear in mind that the Bantu consider human life as the most valuable good and that their ideal is not only to live to a good old age protected from anxieties but above all to remain, even after death, a vital force continually reinforced. (118)

Once Sethe murders the baby, completely alienating herself from her living Muntu community, she can remain connected only through transcendence. Her identity transforms. She interacts with the ancestral Muntu more than any other character within the novel. She begins to talk with ancestral Muntu in her "keeping room". Her dead child occupies (haunts) her living space. She thinks constantly of Halle, Sixo and the other Pauls. She looks to Baby Suggs for advisement. Sethe's offensive act changes her categorization as a Muntu. She is no longer simply a living human Muntu. Her act forces Sethe into a stronger relationship to the dead. She remains isolated from the living Muntu at 124 Bluestone Rd. and concurrently enters a world without limits. Her murderous act initiates her relationship to the ancestral Muntu.

Like Seth of Egypt, Sethe experiences an exile from her community of origin. Her actions at 124 Bluestone Rd. isolate her. She begins an engagement with the Muntu not restricted to the physical world. Sethe, like Seth, acts as the liaison to the dead. In *Beloved*, Muntu lost during the Middle Passage connect to their descendant Muntu through Sethe. And because Sethe has so offended African ancestral sensibilities by killing her own child, she must begin her journey back to herself and her Muntu community with their permission and assistance. Sethe moves forward in communion with ancestral Muntu.

It is extremely important to note here that within African philosophy, the dead are

as much a part of the community as the living. Traditionally, and ideally, ancestors work with the individual and the entire community for the betterment of all experience. Ancestors in *Beloved* work with Sethe for the betterment of the community. Ancestors, brought to life as the character Beloved, initiate Sethe's cathartic experience with her past. In turn, and most significantly, that ancestral voice initiates the acknowledgement Morrison presents as first necessary for communal healing. She insists that we must first look honestly at our past, no longer willingly neglecting our beloved ancestors for fear of dealing with our own unspeakable trauma. We have ancestral family about whom we rarely speak. Morrison insists that they are present and among us, demanding we honor them. She draws from Ntu to bring these ancestors forth. In *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture*, Janheinz Jahn further explains the relationship of the ancestor to the individual and community: "In line with the hierarchy of 'forces' the dead ancestors assume an enhanced vital superiority of intelligence and will over the living...they interact with the living" (106).

Jahn's explication supports Toni Morrison's continuing focus on African-Americans' ancestral connection. In traditional African culture, it is the job of the individual, in conjunction with the community, to feed and nurture the ancestor. The individual and ancestor are part of the collective community, and that includes the living and the dead: the Muntu. Toni Morrison reconnects both her characters and her readers to the "living dead" in *Beloved.* We can see how Sethe acts as a conduit for the reconnection to the "living dead". As an amalgamated Muntu, Sethe acts in unexpected ways. She moves through all categories of Muntu and stays connected, through her experience with Beloved, to those on the other side of life.

Sethe's break from the material world can best be understood by analyzing her dialogic exchanges with other characters and her relationship with Beloved. Recall that Seth and Sethe act as conduits to the "living dead" mentioned by Christian and Jahn. Morrison introduces us to Sethe's relationship to the ancestor in the first chapter in an exchange that begins with Paul D.

> "You got Company?"
>
> "Off and on." said Sethe.
>
> "Good God." He backed out the door and onto the porch.
>
> "What kind of evil you got in here?"
>
> "It's not evil, just sad. Come on. Just step through."(6)

From Paul D's and Sethe's varied reactions to the red and "undulating" presence, we can surmise a distinction in their relationships to the ancestral Muntu presenting themselves as this red light (6). Paul D automatically assumes the presence as ghostly or evil. However, Sethe owns a different sensibility and sees it as not evil, but sad. How does she know? Why is Paul D fearful of the presence? Paul D assumes a fearful posture, reacting to what he understands as a ghostly, threatening presence. John Mbiti says that the term "ghost" is used by those who do not understand the concept of ancestor (4). Paul D does not express the same desire or need for connection with the "living dead" ancestor. He is still limited by his physicality, while Sethe has no such limitations. She has a stronger sense of connectedness to these ancestors. One can argue that in a sense, Sethe recognizes the presence Paul D calls evil as the resurrected vital force of her dead baby daughter. One can also argue that she subconsciously knows that "red" and "undulating" presence as the omnipresent force of the murdered victims of the

Transatlantic Slave Trade. Thus, she does not fear them, but rather recognizes them as familiars.

Sethe later substantiates her connection to these living dead Muntu in other dialogic exchanges, beginning with her explanation of her meditative practices to Denver. Denver asks,

> "What were you praying for Ma'am?"
>
> "Not for anything. I don't pray anymore. I just talk."
>
> "What were you talking about?"
>
> "You wouldn't understand, baby."
>
> "Yes, I will."
>
> "I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go... I used to think it was my rememory... What I remember is a picture floating around out there... you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else... even though it's all over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you."
>
> "If it's still there waiting that must mean that nothing ever dies."
>
> "... Nothing ever does"(35-36).

This passage indicates Sethe's strong tie to and understanding of ancestral Muntu. Sethe interacts with the memories and experiences of others. Her concept of time and experience has changed. Her memories and the memories of others are always present. And nothing ever dies.

From her dialogue, we can cull her philosophical observations as they pertain to the metaphysical world with which she interacts. Sethe's conversation reveals namely,

that: 1) all memory is alive and present; 2) memory is not limited to personal experience; and 3) memory is not limited in spacial dimensions. Her observation mirrors Jahn's definition of all Muntu and illuminates the concept of Beloved as the embodied "living dead". Sethe's daughter did not die in the shed that day. She is present among them and always has been. If she remains, so do those other West Africans lost during the slave trade. They remain obstinately, angered over the circumstances of their deaths and angered over their neglect by their alive but forgetful descendants.

As Sethe becomes the connection to the dead in *Beloved*, Beloved becomes the collective representative of the "living dead" Muntu. As a character, she gives voice and body to the "disremembered and unaccounted for" victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (274). *In Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, anthropologist Michael Taussig argues that:

> The space of death is important in the creation of meaning and consciousness, nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes. We may think of the space of death as a threshold that allows for illumination as well as extinction. Although some would argue that the United States is now a 'kinder, gentler nation,' we cannot escape the raw fact that our boundary is filled with the blood from five hundred years of slavery, removal, and conquest and that our border is a constant space of death and terror. (qtd in Holland 4)

This "space of death" can tell so very much about a culture. Death, a process evocative of all finality, ironically indicates a great deal about how people live within a society.

How do members tend to die? How are the dead cared for? What meaning do the lives of the dead carry in the lives of the living? Following death, who sustains the culture for future generations? We can look at the "space of death" in reference to the millions of Africans who died as a direct result of American slavery. More often than not those Africans died of violence or neglect. They were then tossed aside, left unnamed and forgotten except by those living most immediate to them. Even then, for the living to be able to forget them would be a blessing preferred to constant mindfulness of their absence. Let us say that memory is alive and the Muntu of all categories are clamoring to be heard. Put aside the clean slate or tabula rasa aforementioned as a point of contention between the Africanist experience and the American obsession with forgetfulness. In *Beloved*, Morrison argues that the "blood from five hundred years of slavery" must be recognized and emotionally processed by this society. And as long as it is not, it will surface again and again to haunt the lives of all not mindful of the past, nor mindful of its presence in the present. She also argues in the Ntu tradition, that all memory is alive and striving to the fore. Memory, or "re-memory", comes to life when Beloved literally struggles out of the waters of a creekbed and waits to be recognized by Sethe, Paul D and Denver on their way home from the fair.

Beloved is the novel's memorialized representation of those "disremembered and unaccounted for" Africans whose blood runs thick through the soil of North America (274). She does not fit into either category of Muntu neatly. She, like Sethe, is Muntu created by the African experience in America. Morrison makes that distinction throughout the novel. In fact, while Beloved fits within all categories of Muntu, we delimit her identity primarily because of her behavior toward the living Muntu with

whom she interacts.

The first indication of Beloved's ancestral identity occurs when she meets Sethe, Paul D, and Denver. She strikes each character differently because each has a different relationship to and need from their ancestral memory. Paul D "did not press the young woman with the broken hat about where from or how come… what occupied them at the moment was what it might be that she needed" (53). Moments before, she needs water, cup after cup of water. She drinks to replenish and restore the libations lost to her as an unrecognized and therefore dishonored ancestor. To be unnamed, unnourished, and unrecognized is the greatest insult to an ancestor. Beloved's initial interactions with Sethe, Denver and Paul D support the fact that:

> The activating and final aim of all Bantu effort is only the intensification of vital force. To protect or to increase vital force, that is the motive and the profound meaning in all their practices. It is the ideal which animates the life of the Muntu, the only thing for which he is ready to suffer and to sacrifice himself. (Shutte 175)

According to Innocent Onyewuenyi, "a person is really dead when his vital force is totally diminished. Due to their preoccupation with immortality and deathlessness, the ancestors are concerned with the increase of their and their descendents' vital force" (2). Beloved immediately seeks to replenish nourishment that has been lost through her neglect. She needs to restore her vital force. Her community neglected her because vital force is increased when the ancestor is honored in traditional African ceremony wherein the ancestor's name is called as libations are poured for nourishment. Jahn adds,

> The whole weight of an extinct (my emphasis) race lies on the dead… for

> they have for then whole tune of their infinite deathlessness, missed the goal of their existence, that is, to perpetuate themselves through reproduction in the living person. (109)

Place his assertion within the context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and the preoccupation the ancestor has with "deathlessness" increases exponentially. Barbara Christian offers,

> In not being able to remember, name, and feed those who passed on in the Middle Passage, those who survive had to abandon their living dead to the worst possible fate that could befall a West African: complete annihilation. (379)

This is the maddening conundrum which, activated by Paul D's physicality, stirs the red and "undulating" light to the fore. Morrison again ties Paul D's physicality to the passionate, angered, chaotic, ancestral presence when Beloved, after having moved him literally and sexually to the coldness of the wood shed, demands that Paul D call her by name: Red Heart. Fittingly, the most pronounced revelations regarding Beloved's identity emerge in relation to violence and sex: the mainstays of the slave system. She reveals her identity as a representation of the collective ancestral presence in more quiet ways, however, to Denver.

Denver, as the character most capable of promising a re-connection to the ancestor, provides the water that Beloved drinks. And later, in an important scene in which Beloved dances with Denver, she (Beloved) repeats, verbatim, Sethe's invocation that initiates her passage into the physical world and 124 Bluestone Rd. In the earlier scene, Sethe, eager to confront her painful past and end the ruckus it makes in her home,

holds hands with Denver, saying, "Come on. You may as well just come on" (4). Sethe then, acting as the gateway for the resurrection of the dead, invites the collective Beloved she assumes as her daughter to enter 124. Beloved repeats the same invitation to Denver as she demonstrates her physical boundlessness by moving her body from one corner of the room to another without using her feet (74). In the same scene she further explains her origin:

> "In the dark my is Beloved."
>
> "What's it like over there, where you were before?"
>
> "I'm small in that place… "
>
> "Were you cold?"
>
> "Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in" (75).

The point should here be made that Muntu differs from Carl Jung's concept of a collective unconscious in that Jung's theory was just that: an intellectual theory developed by an individual social scientist. It does not reflect the philosophy or way of living of a people. Jung's theory hinges primarily on archetypes that present in the psyches of individual human beings in the process of living out their own mythologies. Each individual mythology builds upon the total of human consciousness and over generations certain symbols remain as agents for mandates of survival. Muntu is not based on his theory of the archetype. It is based primarily on the communal recognition of spiritual phenomena which act to vitally tie ancestral history to personal experience. Muntu does not consider archetypes, nor does it consider the entire human race. It is culturally specific.

As evidence of the Muntu's cultural specificity, note an important passage

wherein Beloved describes her memory and stifling experience on the other side, where the dead black bodies collect, creating a "hot thing" she describes in a later scene. She explains to Denver, "I don't know the names" (75). They are anonymous. They are the Muntu unnamed as a result of slavery. Denver fulfills her need for ancestral ties by identifying Beloved as her sister, but she eventually questions that conclusion, considering that Beloved's identity may be more complex that she first thought. Paul D asks, "You think she sure 'nough your sister?" "At times. At times I think she was—more" (266). Beloved finally definitively identifies herself in a chapter of broken, sensual remembrances. She speaks of experiences on a slave ship where men without skin (white men) bring her water. She then identifies a woman, more than likely her mother, or her grandmother: a woman "with [her] face." Amazingly, Morrison uses this scene to identify Beloved as a passenger aboard a slave ship, but also likens the slave ship to an overfilled, swelling coffin. The Muntu fill the coffin. As evidenced by this scene, they are experiential, yet dead; a "hot thing" (210).

We realize Beloved as the multi-dimensional, multi-vocal presence and embodiment of Muntu when Stamp Paid, hears "hasty", "loud", "urgent", clamorous voices outside 124 Bluestone Rd. They all speak at once (172). Those cacophonic voices later gather from outside the house and swell the body of Beloved. The house quiets as Beloved's body swells and Sethe accordingly diminishes. The Muntu have gathered to ravage Sethe, who after all, has insulted their lot by murdering her own child. John Mbiti offers that "to'die' immediately is a tragedy that must be avoided at all costs", and unfortunately Sethe sentenced her own child to that fate (Christian 208). Caught within the psychically torturous realities of American slavery and its aftermath, Sethe,

like the African-American, disconnects herself from the mandates of African culture, thus cutting the ties necessary for collective survival. Her (our) action is understandable, but not excusable. A reconnection to that ancestral past must be made. Otherwise, we, like Sethe, merely avoid the reality of the past, continuing to anger, our already "Red Heart[ed]" ancestors.

CHAPTER 2

KINTU—THINGS: INANIMATE OBJECTS ACTIVE UNDER MUNTU

Toni Morrison looks to Kintu to make further use of the African concept of Ntu. Kintu essentially means thing. In the category Kintu belong plants, animals, minerals, tools, objects of customary usage, and so on (Jahn 102). Although very important, Kintu is a less dominant category . Kintu or Bintu (plural) contains a force which is inactive until activated by Muntu, or people. Kintu become relevant as they interact with other categories of Ntu in bringing force to an aesthetic which is spiritually non-exclusive. Thus, inanimate objects take on a life force not recognized within traditional western culture. We can take several examples of Kintu from within *Beloved* and identify how Morrison uses them to connect her characters and readers to an African past.

By incorporating Kintu into *Beloved*, Toni Morrison further supports the notion that she relies extensively on African modalities to support her storytelling. We can locate several instances where other inanimate objects actively participate in her literary fixing ceremony. The three most notable things that become active under the command of her main character's psyches are Paul D's tobacco tin, and two trees, one named Brother and another on Sethe's back.

The Tobacco Tin

The tobacco tin functions as a reservoir for Paul D's trauma. He had brought it, along with the pain of his experience, with him from Sweet Home to 124 Bluestone Rd.

He kept it locked and solidly secured to avoid the grief of his past:

> It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open. (113)

Nothing in this world could pry it open; it therefore took Paul D's engagement and interaction with Beloved to open the tin and resolve his pain. He had compartmentalized his experiences and decided to shut himself down psychically in order not to lose his mind. He, like millions of Africans in America, had suffered extreme trauma, the kind that requires gentle treatment:

> To recall trembling in a box built into the ground, grateful for the daylight spent doing mule work in a quarry because he did not tremble when he had a hammer in his hands. The box did what Sweet Home had not, what working like an ass and living like a dog had not; drove him crazy so he would not lose his mind. (41)

Morrison etches the grief in the anterior lives of the slave in America and Paul D is an excellent example of the catharsis Morrison suggests as possible when one confronts trauma. Not until directly faced with his past does Paul D become willing to begin the process of rejuvenating his inner life. And though his process initiates because of his contact with Beloved, it is energized by the hope he has for Sethe, Denver and himself.

The tin holds Paul D's pain, fear, passion, and anger. That part of him had been tucked away long ago, waiting. He finally makes a fearless effort to confront his past,

made to feel safer with Sethe and Denver. It gently eased out of him in his exchanges with Sethe who had also tucked her thoughts away in the safe caverns of her mind. He spoke of the rooster, Mister, who was allowed the full expression of his identity: "Mister was allowed to be and stay who he was... But I wasn't... " (72). Sethe listened, consoled him with a rub on the knee, as he thought, "He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now" (72-73). Paul D used the tobacco tin as a reservoir for the self that never felt safe enough to love and be who he was born to be, a man. He instead looked across a yard awed by a rooster more free than he and respected enough to be called Mister. In his experience as an American slave, he was essentially nothing, but within the framework of African philosophy, Paul D, as a living human Muntu, had the power of vital force enough to endow the tin to hold all that had contributed in creating the self that he kept tucked away. He kept it near his heart until he was ready to freely express all of whom his experience had created. The tin did not open until he opened his heart to Sethe and Denver, and reconciling himself to all that it entailed. The tobacco tin, as a Kintu, worked specifically for Paul D in the process of him becoming a whole, living human Muntu.

Two Trees

In Bantu culture, "the bintu (pl. of kintu) are frozen forces, which await the command of a Muntu. They stand at the "disposal" of muntu, or 'at hand' for him" (Jahn 102). The tree named Brother also functions as a Kintu in *Beloved*. We can see how the novel's Muntu endow this tree with a force working to serve their needs. Brother operates as a centerpiece to the relationship between the three Pauls and Sixo. It provides

shade and reference to the lives of these men, particularly Paul D, who sweltered under the heat and watchful eyes of the oppressive slave system. As he lies beside Sethe, contrasting the tree on her back to his favored tree, Brother, Paul D thinks,

> Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he knew because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did since way back when he took the midday meal in the fields of Sweet Home.... His choice he called Brother, and sat under it, alone sometimes, sometimes with Halle or the other Pauls, but more often with Sixo,... (Morrison 21).

Beneath Brother Paul D finds security that is lacking everywhere else in his experience. There, he communes with the natural world and with his brothers, most notably Sixo, who eventually gives up speaking English and sets himself afire. Sixo, who is markedly a combination of the African and Native American, schools Paul D about natural cooking and the workings of time. They ate and laughed beneath Brother. The tree provided a rootedness otherwise lacking on Sweet Home. It was a place where men could be brothers and where thoughts of love and intimacy were possible. Sixo spoke of the thirty-mile woman, while Halle and the Pauls thought of sex with Sethe. The interior of their lives found a space for expression underneath this tree. Ironically, everyone was to meet beneath Brother at the start of their planned escape into freedom. The plan went awry and Sethe and her children were the only ones to make it across the Ohio River and into physical freedom. Paul D was the only man known to have made it out alive. So, Brother provides an affirmative point of reference for those remembering Sweet Home.

Additionally, the legacy of that day planted itself across Sethe's back in the form of what Amy Denver called a "chokecherry" tree. Sethe was beaten for telling Mrs. Garner that schoolteacher's boys had held her down and taken her milk. The boys were ordered to open her back, leaving a physical reminder of the terror of her slave experience, particularly the terror of the day she lost her husband and all the men she knew as brothers. She was pregnant and nursing and beaten and sexually defiled all in one day. The chokecherries were the blood dripping from her back. Paul D rightly assessed her tree as different from his, because Brother served as it was meant to serve. It was never perverted or manipulated by the slave owner, but instead served as comfort for the enslaved Muntu at Sweet Home. On the other hand, the chokecherry tree on Sethe's back serves as a point of reference for the legacy of Sethe's pain. It sits on Sethe's back, out of her sight, yet fully visible to anyone viewing her naked. It sits there, wrought out of obvious physical and emotional pain, yet unacknowledged by Sethe until Paul D enters her home and makes quick love to her after years of waiting. The tree, arguably, also represents collective pain as it resulted from the day her first life fell apart, the day Halle smelled of butter and two of her brothers died beneath slavery's cruel lash. While her beating was meant to vanquish Sethe, showing that "definitions belonged to the definers" (she tattled thinking she had some recourse on Sweet Home), it conversely strengthened her with a marker for her past (190). It serves as something she cannot forget, though she might try. Morrison endows the chokecherry tree with the force of carrying the legacy of Sweet Home's pain while she gives Brother the power to inform Paul D and Sixo of the secrets and legacy of their past as they sit beneath this repository of the deified. Both trees connect Paul D, Sethe and other Muntu to the past. These trees

give force to their memories and recall that:

> the activating and final aim of all Bantu (pl. of Muntu) effort is the intensification of vital force. To protect or to increase vital force, that is the motive and the profound meaning in all their practices. It is the ideal which animates the life of the Muntu, the only thing for which he is ready to suffer and to sacrifice himself. (Shutte 175)

The tree ties them to their memories which in turn tie them to the vital force of their own lives. Morrison continues to rely on Ntu in her novel. Muntu and Kintu are both important elements to the concept of Ntu. Paul D's tobacco tin, the tree named Brother, and the chokecherry tree on Sethe's back act, under the command of Muntu to vitally tie each character to her/his past. Morrison, thereby, allows each Kintu to connect her characters and readers to an African past.

CHAPTER 3

HANTU—THE INTERMINGLING OF PLACE AND TIME

Hantu is the force that localizes spatially and temporally every event and every "motion", for since all beings are force, everything is constantly in motion (Jahn 103). That is, a question of time can be answered in terms of place, for example, "When did the girl first appear? After the Clearing." A "unity of space and time is conceived in traditional African thought without clocks or Cartesian co-ordinates..." (Jahn 103). For the sake of this discussion, it is important to note that time layers upon time and place upon place. Experience becomes united within the minds of the novel's Muntu because they carry the marker of their foreparents, the African consciousness, which slavery did not destroy. Specific incidents show how Morrison uses Hantu to illustrate this point.

As stated earlier, time and place interact within African culture and within *Beloved.* They do so in a way that is non-linear, sometimes even circular. Several scenes within the novel illustrate this point. Take for example the point at which Paul D questions Sethe about the news he has received from Stamp Paid. Paul D asks Sethe directly whether or not it was she who killed her child in the shed and she responds physically:

> Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask....Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes

> and wells. (163)

The critical commentary about Morrison's decision to develop a circular, nonlinear narrative technique offers a useful study of the competing trends in the critical responses to *Beloved.* Many critics cite the preceding passage in which Sethe's concept of time becomes clear as she evades Paul D's questions about the newspaper clipping. In an answer to more conventional critics, Barbara Christian notes that in African cosmology, time is nonlinear, and thus Morrison's and Sethe's circling finds root in an ancestral worldview "rather than in the work of Derrida" (Christian 13).

Sethe, among other characters, declares on several occasions the way she intermingles place and time. She very directly tells Denver and the reader that her concept of time and space differ distinctively from the standard of those who had bound and ravaged her as a slave. At one point she is interrupted by Denver as she was praying and they begin a discussion about time and memory:

> "I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it.
> Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to
> think it was my re-memory....If a house burns down, it's gone,
> but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory,
> but out there in the world. What I remember is just
> a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean,
> even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or
> knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place it happened." (36)

Her discussion reveals her worldview as it pertains to time and space. Because Sethe believes the world to be ordered in this way, she feels a sense of urgency as it pertains to

her experience and her legacy to her children. She then explains to Denver,

> "Some day you be walking down the road and you hear something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else...where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away....The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—If you go there and stand in the place where it was it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you....That's why I had to get my children out. No matter what." (36)

Sethe's concept of time and place explains much of her action. It explains why she so fiercely wished to protect her children. She did not wish for them to experience the collective anguish of all that had taken place at Sweet Home. Concurrently, however, her inability to face what she saw and did had a lot to do with her isolation from her contemporaneous Muntu. Sethe became isolated from the community because she chose to act as an individual and not in accordance with all the mandates of the collective well-being of the Muntu. That is exactly why Beloved returns, to make her resolve her past and to reconnect her with the only community which can sustain her, her ancestors, and her descendents, the Muntu.

Sethe, at one point was closely connected to her community of Muntu. She cites this in a remembrance of her mother and how they interacted, passing on the Muntu's legacy:

> "One thing she did do. She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her

> breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, "this is your ma'am. 'This',and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.'" (61)

Prodded by Beloved, Sethe recalls what she had completely forgotten, the woman named Nan, who cared for her and spoke in a different language and told her about her mother and how they knew each other from the sea. In an earlier passage Sethe remembers them dancing the "antelope" and speaking the language she also knew then and how her mother kept her because she was the black man's child. Her mother was hanged. Sethe does not know why, but while being prodded by Beloved, recalls some of the legacy her mother left her. Sethe had worked hard to keep the past at bay, but the simple questions from Beloved and from her daughter brought time and "rememory" to the fore, to the present portion of her mind's eye. Beloved questions Sethe about her heritage. She questions her about her past. She seduces Sethe as her returned daughter, opening her mind with hope towards reconciliation, but functions concurrently to tie Sethe to the legacy of her historical trauma. She had a mother, but her mother was hanged. She had a language, but that language was lost. She also recalls that she was a part of a community of Muntu and was told by others within that community not to forget them. Her "rememory" mirrors one described by Frederick Douglass in 1845:

> [The slaves] would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought came up, come out—if not in the word, in the sound;-and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would

CONCLUSION

A mysterious epigraph at the novel's beginning led to this study: "sixty million and more." The author attaches nothing to the statement, but follows with a biblical quote: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved."(Romans 9:25) Both sentiments, brilliant in their precision, capture the essence of this novel. Morrison wrote *Beloved* to pay homage to the reported sixty million or more Africans who died during the Middle Passage. She also wrote *Beloved* to catalogue the details of a dreadful history that took place in a country that wishes to forget that for which it is responsible but will not apologize. Moreover, and more significantly, Morrison wrote *Beloved* to rightfully call the names of those whom we have all ignored. She calls them Beloved and places them and their experience directly beside our own, inviting us to recognize them in all that makes them human. About these neglected souls she says:

> There is no place here where I can go, or where you can go, and think about or not think about, or summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of—slaves....Something that reminds us of the ones who made the journey, and those who did not make it. (qtd. In Rody 9)

Morrison dares us to acknowledge their history and culture, its grandeur, beauty and complexity. They become the subject of our collective history as Morrison invokes their voices to help explain. Jeanna Fuston says, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved* illustrates the

construction of subjectivity and presence by deconstructing the foundations that have marginalized and essentialized African-Americans" (464).

Toni Morrison uses an established African paradigm to invoke the names and spirits of those lost during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. She specifically ties her characters as well as her readers to an ancestral past by relying on three of Ntu's main components: Muntu, Kintu, and Hantu. With Muntu (Man), we see how six of the novel's characters struggle toward self-actualization by re-connecting to other Muntu whether living or dead. We can also see how Kintu (Things) are used by the characters and the author as symbols of stored history, but only as endowed by the experience and consciousness of a Muntu. Finally, Morrison integrates a traditionally African co-mingling of time and place to reconnect Sethe to the Muntu community she thought had long ago abandoned her. In the end, Sethe reconnects as part of a whole. She previously existed in isolation with her thoughts of time and place plaguing her; unable to place her experience in historical context. The novel ends with each character rounded and whole; seemingly connected to a community whose history they had previously wished to forget. Each character finally begins to actualize her/himself after an instructive and painful interaction with the manifestation of the neglected living dead, Beloved. Hence, just as her characters become whole and integrated as part of a Muntu community, so should the reader of this novel. Morrison engages us in a "fixing ceremony" of the sort conducted by Baby Suggs, holy, in the Clearing. She invites us to listen, heed, watch, touch, feed and love the Muntu we have all neglected for fear of the sheer weight of the task. Her instruction is clear: do so because the "Red Heart" within them "[n]ever dies" (36).

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