

Remembering the Ancestors and River Goddess as a Healing Process in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT

Faced with the historical trauma of diaspora and slavery, black American narrative must confront the problems of silence and representation. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* demonstrates a powerful strategy of addressing this problem by engaging in a self-empowering recreation of myths that virtually invent the historical voice lost through slavery. This generative mythic function enables readers with an investment in the "deep memory process" (described by Woolger and Tomlinson) of historical trauma to escape the trap of silence and begin to construct elements for envisioning a new, positive future.

KEY WORDS

historical trauma, identity, deep memory process, Woolger and Tomlinson, myth, the unrepresentable



In Morrison's *Beloved*, in response to Paul D's question about the ghostly Beloved, Denver replies that "at times I think she was—more" (314). More than a decade after the publication of *Beloved*, the question of Beloved's "identity" has still not been definitively answered. According to Thomas R. Edwards, Beloved "is unquestionably the dead daughter's spirit in human form" (18). House contends that Beloved "is not a supernatural being of any kind but simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery" (17). Another critic, Walter Clemons, asserts that "Beloved is also a ghost from the slave ships of Sethe's ancestry" (75), thus embodying the suffering of the Middle Passage. Holden holds the view that "Beloved possesses the identity of Sethe's slave mother" (4). This paper approaches the "more" in Beloved's identity by hypothesizing that the narrative healing process is really initiated through a remembering and retelling of the African myth of the ancestors and of the River Goddess Oshun, who is embodied by Beloved. The ancestral events and the appearances of goddesses are overlap here, and they are transformed into the collective myth. Through "rememory," the historical trauma and ancestral events—the suffering of the black slaves' ancestors and the bitterness of the goddess—are reconstructed. Through retelling this old story, the African origins and traditions of the American blacks are preserved. Through speaking out unspeakable thoughts, the healing process is initiated.

Beloved claims not only her own history but the histories of "sixty million and more": she represents the wounded ancestors and the goddess, who wait for reclamation and naming. Furthermore, in *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction*, Karen Carmean not only regards Beloved

as herself a slave but also as an African river spirit (85). Using Carmean's idea as a point of departure, I would like to point out that *Beloved*, simultaneously the incarnation of the multitudes of African ancestors and the river goddess Osun, leads the African American Women to rise and fight against the whites through stirring them to remember their identities: where they have come from and who they are. In her essay "Speaking in Tongues," Mae G. Henderson affirms that "black women writers have encoded oppression as a discursive dilemma" and have used "silence as an important element of this code" (24). Morrison's portrait of *Beloved* represents her desire to disrupt the silence and speak out the unspeakable thoughts of the ancestors and the goddess. Morrison's fictional representation of "black women's subjection, victimization, and scapegoating also enables the possibilities to subvert and diminish these modes of dominance by ensuring that black women's voices are heard" (*Rootedness* 49).

According to Houston Baker,

the spiritual realm of the goddess is a dimension of ancestry. The idea of ancestry obviously implicates a spiritual history, one that is enabled through memory and that reflects, in the energies vested in ornate structures of their texts, the density of the mythologies" (Holloway 101-02).

Most importantly, the etymology of the name Osun reveals the interconnection between the spiritual realm of the goddess and the dimension of ancestry. According to Abraham, "a probable root of Osun's name is *orisun* (source). Abraham defines *orisun* as both "source of a river" and "original ancestor" or "source of a people" (Murphy 239). Thus, the ancestral events and the appearance(s) of goddesses are intertwined and complementary. Through reenacting and retelling the mythical elements, the historical voice lost during slavery can be revived since "mythologies are the reconstructions of memory" (Holloway 101-02). Africans believe that the spiritual and physical realms are woven together. John S. Mbiti asserts that traditional African philosophy "emphasized that the spiritual universe is a unit

within the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinctions or separate them" (Mbiti 97). Thus, it is meaningless to try to isolate their sources in the novel because Toni Morrison has skillfully spun these pieces into a whole, fusing these elements with others of her own invention in order to raise her tale to the level of myth.

Beloved as the Ancestors

Higgins describes how Dr. K. A. Busia, one of Africa's foremost social scientists of the 1950s, claims that the Ashanti believe in a universe full of spirits:

There is the great Spirit, the Supreme Being, who created all things, and who manifests his power through a pantheon of gods; below these are lesser spirits which animate trees, animals, or charms; then there are the ever-present spirits of the ancestors whose constant contact with the life of man on the earth brings the world of spirits so close to the land of the living. (191)

Thus African cosmology is based on the notion of co-existence: every element is interconnected and in ceaseless interaction with the others.

In African traditions, the dead ancestors have to cross the river to another world. Kenneth Little claims that "[i]n order to enter the new country, the person's spirit has to cross a river, and certain rites, known as '*tindyamei*' or 'crossing the water,' are necessary" (Little 116). In the novel, *Beloved* indeed emerges from the water and returns to the land of the living. Her implausibly flawless skin further supports the idea that she is nothing but a supernatural being. At the end of the novel, she once again re-enters the water in order to return to the realm of the dead. Moreover, "the conditions of this world are apparently continued in the hereafter, and the life led by the ancestral spirits seems to be similar in many respects to that of the people on earth" (Little 116). According to Morrison's descriptions, it seems that life in the land of

the dead is not that different from that of the Middle Passage. When Sethe and Denver ask Beloved what it is like down there, her answer unsettles us because we are confused about the locale. The memory of their being taken away from Africa, the Middle Passage, and the inhuman treatment of slavery are all merged into a collective memory, symbolized by Beloved in the novel. Beloved's description of her experience reveals that this *locus*, this *topos* can be not only the ship in the Middle Passage but also Africa. Beloved claims that "I wanted to help her when she was picking the flowers, but the clouds of gunsmoke blinded me and I lost her" (*Beloved* 253). This sorrowful wailing poignantly reveals the atrocity of the whites and the fear of the Africans faced with an unexpected attack. Therefore:

Beloved is not only Sethe's dead daughter returned, "but the return of all the (African) faces, all the drowned, (re)remembered faces of mothers and their children who lost their being because of the force of Euro-American slave history. Beloved becomes a cultural mooring place, a moment for reclamation and for naming. (Holloway 178)

She claims not only her own history but the histories of "sixty million and more." The repression of their traumatic memories renders the blacks unable to move on into the future because they are disconnected from their past and their ancestors. According to Higgins, one crucial challenge of the novel is "to connect, to remember, and to acknowledge the ancestors" (246). In a 1988 interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison spoke of the "issue of restlessness among ancestor spirits. There are the spirits which have been largely unacknowledged and unaccounted for as the dislocation of African people and individuals—the diaspora—has swallowed the memory of their existence" (246). Without reconciliation with and integration of their traumatic memories (their unspeakable thoughts), the blacks will be trapped in the circuit of their own traumatic past, seeing no hope of creating a positive future.

In the novel, then, Beloved stands for embodied memory, forcing

the silenced and repressed victims to face up to and express (“speak out”) their unspeakable thoughts. Though Sethe tries her best to keep the past at bay, the appearance of Beloved drives her to the reenactment of these repressed memories. Functioning as an ancestral figure, Beloved stirs her silent, inert descendants to reopen their scars and initiate the process of self-healing and self-reclamation.

Beloved as the River Goddess Osun

The child of Ife where the sun rises
 The mother who gives a bounteous gift
 The tender-hearted one
 The source of water
 The child of Ijesa
 The water to whom the king prostrates to receive a gift.
 ---oriki Osun, ode Remo 1992 (Murphy 1)

In *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction*, Karen Carmean held the view that Beloved represents the slaves brought over as well as an African river spirit (85). Using Carmean's idea as a point of departure, I would like to point out that Beloved represents not only the ancestors but also the River Goddess Osun. The Yoruba *orisa* (deity) Osun is identified, not only with the great river which bears her name, but with many streams, pools, and springs. In every place where she is worshiped, her priestesses and priests find her healing and transforming presence in the flowing water of local rivers (Murphy 239). According to African cosmology, Osun is the River Goddess of fertility and healing in Yoruba traditions (Murphy 1). She is the guardian spirit of the tribe. Her power resides in the healing power of this water. By themselves disrobing and entering the water, the initiates are purified and healed.

Beloved's attachment to honey further reveals the connection between her and Osun. According to African mythology, the male *orishas* (gods) and Osun are sent to Earth to create everything. In the beginning, they neglect Osun while she offers to help. Their contempt

toward her results in the downfall of whatever the *orishas* construct. They finally find out the cause of their failures and try to make peace with Osun. Nevertheless, she is not touched by gifts of gold and copper. It is not until they bring her an offering of honey that Osun decides to forgive them (Katyberry). Therefore, honey is the favorite offering given her by women and in myth Osun is said to spray herself with honey.

If *Beloved* represents the River Goddess Osun, Sethe can be considered as the initiate. Not only *Beloved* (the river Goddess) but also Sethe (the initiate) crosses the water. Sethe is reborn while she crosses the Ohio river. She is baptized in the healing water, where she gives birth to her daughter Denver. The image of healing and fertility is revealed through these double-births: one is the rebirth of Sethe, and the other is the birth of her future hope, Denver.

To Remember the Ancestors and Goddess as a Healing Process

In the novel, *Beloved* works to voice an inexpressible sense of loss and trauma, in terms that not only connect an anguished individual consciousness with its/her/his ancestors, but also reveal the impact of the spiritual forces of the goddess on her initiates. If we read this from the perspective of myth, *Beloved* stands for the ancestors and Goddess, who both function as healers.

In *Deep Memory Process and the Healing of Trauma*, Roger J. Woolger and Andy Tomlinson claim that Deep Memory Process can be divided into three levels of engagement with the psyche. The first step is to access traumatic residues; the second step is somato-emotional release (catharsis); the third step is reintegration of lost fragments of the traumatized self. This third step can be further divided into three crucial methods (3-4): (1) dialogue with inner figures, encountered during the initial journey; (2) reconciliation and mediation through figures that may manifest themselves as ancestors, historical archetypes ("past lives") or as transpersonal "spiritual" figures from "higher" realms; (3) transcending and re-framing embedded unconscious belief systems and "seeding" (generating) fresh options in

one's current life (Woolger 4).

Thus in *Beloved*, Morrison employs the second method to bring Sethe into the collective "community of love." Through this communal love, inspired and cultivated by Baby Suggs, Sethe is given the chance to reconcile herself with her ancestors (Baby Suggs, her mother, the sixty million and more) and to purge her sin (especially the sin of killing her baby daughter) through the healing water of the River Goddess Osun.

The whole novel therefore symbolizes a healing process. The conflict between rememory and forgetting is epitomized in the litany—"this is not a story to pass on." And the struggle to reconcile forgetting and retelling envisions the possibility of healing. In the novel, *Beloved* insists "I am not dead. I am not...I am where she told me." It is "as if Sethe's telling, her voice, has assured *Beloved* of her essence. Death loses its permanence in such a voiced universe. The essence of *Beloved*'s presence is Sethe's (re)memberance of her" (Holloway 185). *Beloved*'s existence depends on the rememory of Sethe, just as the existence of the African ancestors and Goddess depends on the rememory of the descendants.

Now I would like to pinpoint two important healing processes in the novel. One is the union of Sethe, *Beloved*, and Denver in the stream of consciousness chapter, while the other is the redemptive chanting of the community women at the end of the novel. First, then, in the "reclaiming" chapter, the mirror-like litany—"you are mine"—symbolizes the union of the ancestors and the descendants, and of the goddess and the initiates. The whole chapter can be read as describing or embodying a sort of holistic cosmos with shattered boundaries. Three of them chant:

You went in the water
 I drank your blood
 I brought your milk. (*Beloved* 256)

This fusion of water, blood, and milk symbolizes the rebirth of the initiates. Buried within the fragmented universe, they are recreated and brought back to the embrace of the holistic cosmos, where the ancestors and the goddess are guarding them. Through the medium of *Beloved*,

Sethe and Denver are thus reconciled and initiated within the spiritual community, “the sixty million and more” and the goddess. This chapter is a redemptive chanting for the return of the ancestors and the goddess. No longer trapped in the traumatic past, Sethe and Denver can move on to the future because a reconciliation with the ancestors and goddess has been achieved.

Second, at the end of the novel, the gathering and harmonious chanting of the community of women symbolizes the reconciliation between the individual and the community and thus the unification of the whole community. For Sethe, it is as if

the clearing had come back to her with all its heat and shimmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. (*Beloved* 308)

Recovering from her lethargy after experiencing this, Sethe returns to their spiritual gathering led by Baby Suggs in the clearing, where she is purged of her guilt through the medium of the (her) ancestors. Furthermore, the right combination of sounds functions as a metaphorical “river”: Sethe is purged of her sin through the healing water of the River Goddess Osun, and trembles “like the baptized in its wash” (*Beloved* 308). She is forgiven by her community, who decide to help her by invoking the spirits, ancestors, and goddess and calling upon them to exorcise the ghost named *Beloved*. Characterizing *Beloved* only as the embodiment of the ghost or as a victimized woman can't fully convey her multidimensionality. Vickroy asserts that *Beloved* “coalesces many traumatic aspects of slavery: ancestors’ experience of the Middle Passage, traumatic memory, emotional and physical suffering, lost family connections, and so forth” (xv). Interestingly, *Beloved* is the ghost that she herself, as the embodiment of the ancestors and River Goddess Osun, has to exorcise. Malmgren points out that

In historical terms, slavery is a very real ghost from our collective past, one that we must confront personally if we are to exorcise it. . . . By personifying slavery as history's ghost, Morrison reimagines the institution and its legacy as a kind of abnormal excess that finally defies rational explanation, a ghastly figure from out of a nightmare. (195)

Beloved then represents the visible manifestation of slavery, forcing the blacks to face the unbearable pain of looking directly at the atrocity of the whites as well as at their own torture and suffering. The blacks, in other words, are forced to return to the site of memory and confront the trauma again. Sethe told Denver that "I used to think it was my rememory . . . But it's not. Places, places are still there . . . 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 where it happened" (*Beloved* 43). Jongjin Noh asserts that "Morrison thus employs a modernist, psychoanalytic 'repetition-with-a-difference,' having her characters inevitably return to an earlier moment of trauma and attempt to transform it" (88). Through *Beloved*, Sethe and her community go through the process of self-exorcism and self-reclamation. The community women search for redemption, forgiveness for their sin of not warning Sethe and that of their indifference towards Sethe. And Sethe yearns for forgiveness from Beloved.

As for the chanting women, they see their younger selves, spiritually bound to each other without envy. The chanting reverberates and crosses from Africa to America, from the past to the present, from the goddess to the initiates. They are no longer isolated. Knowing that they belong to a larger whole endows them with the power to fight against the amnesia the whites have imposed on them. Sethe is pushed to understand that she is connected with "the family"—the extended family including the goddess, spirits, ancestors, and her community. She is initiated into the collective communal love. In the novel, *Beloved* thus functions as a bridge to solidify the community members, who are locked into their own individual desires and repressions. They

are propelled to initiate the quest for a communal redemption.

Conclusion

Thus, *Beloved* is the incarnation of the multitudes of African ancestors and the River Goddess Osun, who lead the African-American women to fight against the whites through stirring them to remember their own ethnic identities: to remember where they have come from and who they are. *Beloved* too, afraid of disintegration, asks to be remembered. She wants all the African-Americans to remember their African origin and traditions, as well as the suffering of their more immediate ancestors and the bitterness of the goddess. In her essay "Speaking in Tongues," Mae G. Henderson claims that "black women writers have encoded oppression as a discursive dilemma" and have used "silence as an important element of this code" (24); *Beloved* represents Morrison's desire to disrupt the silence and express (speak out) the unspeakable thoughts of the ancestors and the Goddess. Morrison's fictional representation of "black women's subjection, victimization, and scapegoating also enables the possibilities to subvert and diminish these modes of dominance by ensuring that black women's voices are heard" (*Rootedness* 49).

In *Beloved*, then, Morrison attempts to challenge the idea that untold stories should remain buried by depicting the unspeakable horror of the Middle Passage and the individual traumas of the black slaves in America. The author strives to "recover the silenced voices and experience of African Americans by re-creating the struggle to witness despite what she regards as a 'national amnesia' about the trauma of slavery as well as the largely unacknowledged trauma of racism" (Vickroy 173). Her message is that the African Americans must be aware of the attempt of their persecutors to eradicate their culture and all of what that culture entails. "The African American's challenge and her great achievement lies in the fact that she triumphed over her oppressors by reconnecting with her ancestors despite the effort of the slave dealers and slave owners to obliterate her identity" (Higgins 65-66).

Moreover, according to Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford, “[u]nder conditions of enslavement and cultural marginalization, Osun traditions became a key feature of African –Atlantic strategies of adaptation and resistance to European values and spirituality” (4-5). Thus the belief in, and practice of, the healing ritual of the River Goddess Osun function as a spiritual mooring-place for African Americans. This healing comes through the triumph of “rememory” over repression. Through recognizing and reclaiming the past, the whole race can move on. In her Nobel-Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison intensified the historical facts and raised them to the level of myth. By means of “rememorying” the African-Americans’ historical trauma from a mythical angle, and thus repeating the true “account” of the collective or communal scar, that wound can finally be healed. As with all trauma, healing only comes through the pain of remembering, of mythically re-enacting. As Amy Denver put it, “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (*Beloved* 42).”

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童妮·摩里森《摯愛》中的療傷敘事： 追憶先祖與河流女神

摘要

經歷過流離失所與奴役制度的歷史的創傷，非裔美國人之敘事必須面對沉默與再現的問題。透過自我充權式的神話再創與創造一個在奴隸制度中失去的歷史之聲，童妮·摩里森的《摯愛》展示了一個面對該問題的有力策略。這個生殖性神話的功能促使讀者投入一個歷史創傷的「深層記憶的過程經驗」（根據 Woolger 與 Tomlinson 所描述），並得以逃出沉默的陷阱，開始重新建構預想積極的新未來的元素。

關鍵字：女歷史創傷、認同、深層記憶過程、吳格與湯凌生、神話、無法再現的