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**Othering the Mother: Traumatic Effects of Motherhood on the
Formation of Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

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Abstract of the Thesis

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As a text based heavily on tropes from both American Gothic literature and the slave narrative genre, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* serves as a complex and delicate commentary on racial ambiguities and the psychologically haunting effects of African American trauma. These ambiguities simultaneously serve as reasons for and consequences of the various traumas that strain the interpersonal relationships between the female characters. Aside from the most blatant and gruesome trauma of the novel—the infanticide that Sethe commits as an act of mercy for her unnamed child—many of the recurring traumatic memories evoke the challenges of motherhood during slavery.

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As a text based heavily on tropes from both American Gothic literature and the slave narrative genre, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* serves as a complex and delicate commentary on racial ambiguities and the psychologically haunting effects of African American trauma. These ambiguities simultaneously serve as reasons for and consequences of the various traumas that strain the interpersonal relationships between the female characters. Aside from the most blatant and gruesome trauma of the novel—the infanticide that Sethe commits as an act of mercy for her unnamed child—many of the recurring traumatic memories evoke the challenges of motherhood during slavery. Sethe, both of her daughters, Baby Suggs, and even Ella, all report the painful memories of their childhoods, and for some, their own later descent into motherhood. Their ambiguous outlooks on motherhood stem from an inability, or rather an unwillingness to claim ownership over themselves or their children once they reach 'freedom' in Ohio. This denial of identity serves as a means of protection against the inevitable losses that a life of slavery would have brought to them and their children. Because there are so few characters willing or able to claim a definable identity for themselves many of them form a dependence on each other while remaining passively aware of their own fragmented identities. The result is a group of traumatized women, attempting communally to create a future for their new 'free' selves.

For these women, consequently, the act of storytelling becomes an attempt for the characters to claim selective ownership over their own pasts—their "rememories" as Morrison writes—with the hope of navigating their own traumatic identities. Unfortunately, taking into consideration the issue of memory from a psychological stance, there arises the troubling nature of *Beloved*'s character and her hypnotic ability to invade Sethe's mind to force Sethe to remember painful moments. Despite her newly found freedom, the freedom to choose whether to remember or repress certain memories is taken from Sethe upon *Beloved*'s arrival at 124. The

traumatic effects that both *Beloved*'s presence and the fresh presence of such old memories have on Sethe are witnessed as the reader watches the two women's gradual descent into the codependent madness within their convoluted mother-daughter bond. When looking more closely at the women's identities—both individual and collective—the unwillingness to remember can be characterized as a source of terror, or more appropriately, of impending trauma, that adds further value to a reading of *Beloved* through the psychological lens of a collectively experienced cultural—and in many ways motherly—trauma. Essentially, as slaves these women were denied the familial bonds necessary in the formation of an identity and have thus learned to perpetuate this denial of self and family as a means to defend themselves against loss; if something does not belong to you it cannot, logically speaking, be lost or taken from you. This defense mechanism is both a psychological reaction to their culturally experienced trauma as slaves, as well as a source for new trauma in the inability to define a personal or cultural identity in their new lives as 'free' women.

Although the conceptual relationship between trauma and terror is perhaps easily understandable or at least easily recognizable, for this literary application, it might be helpful to propose a distinct definition of the phenomena. It is safe to say that all terror is traumatic in varying degrees, but the implications of these acts of terror are what must be deciphered by both Morrison's characters and her readers. In his article, "Art and the Ambiguity of Terrorism," Gorman Beauchamp opens a discussion surrounding race, terror, and the ambiguous relationship between the two. He is particularly concerned with the gray area that many African American literary genres rely on as a source of ambiguity along the ethical spectrum of victim and criminal. The characters he references were once maligned as the savage, evil representation of their race, but are now seen by many modern readers as martyrs capitalizing on some small

window of opportunity to regain the precious freedom—by any means necessary—that had been stolen from them by the *truly* savage white man. Though his argument is centered on the work of Melville rather than Morrison, there is clearly a correlation between the ability to sympathize with the respective characters in their settings of racial turmoil and historical trauma. Beauchamp perpetuates the presence of this gray area falling between the two extremes of acceptance and denial by referencing Auden’s “September 1, 1939”: “Those to whom evil is done/ Do evil in return” (374). Whether the evil done justifies the consequently evil acts is precisely where the ethical ambiguity thrives. It is not, however, the responsibility of the reader to take on this impossible task of condemning or forgiving Sethe for her tragic act of infanticide, but rather to navigate these ambiguous spaces that Morrison artfully creates in an attempt to gain further understanding. The reader’s goal, in part at least, should be to understand the consequences—both physical and psychological—of the presence of the “baby ghost” and the other traumas that haunt Sethe as she struggles with her freedom in Ohio. The repetitious cause of Sethe’s decline into madness is the traumatic role of the mother-daughter dynamic in her life. Morrison gives the reader several lenses, through various key characters, through which to view the value placed on the mother-daughter relationship, or in many cases how the absence of motherly love is a trauma with long lasting effects on the successful formation of identity.

Beauchamp also has an intriguing treatment of what he terms ‘terrorism’, which focuses on the ability of a single act to be “condemnable by one set of values, laudable by another” (378). Sethe’s set of values having grown up an orphaned, abused slave are very different from those of Schoolteacher and his white privileged nephews, despite their own lack of a mother figure throughout the novel. This contradictory dichotomy of judging terror can be seen from the condemning attitude of Schoolteacher’s nephew upon witnessing Sethe’s acts in the shed. The

same nephew who had no trouble perpetrating such horrific trauma on another (Sethe) by robbing her of her maternal milk, “cannot understand why Sethe would bring harm to her children” (Fuston-White 464). The nephew’s psyche, or ‘set of values’, to quote Beauchamp, leaves room to justify the committing of his own horrible acts, and yet allows him to stand in judgment of the acts of another. Despite the nephew’s openly judgmental and arguably hypocritical opinions of Sethe, few of the other characters are as hypercritical as she is in recounting her own motivations for the infanticide.

In her description of the act, recounted to Paul D, Sethe explains that her reason for the infanticide was something unexperienced by and incomprehensible to many of her peers: love. Sethe *attempts*, though not without struggle, to claim herself and her children as truly free from Schoolteacher and his boys, and from the radically traumatic slave life she left behind in Kentucky. This openness to love was a blessing and a curse for Sethe. It motivated her to be strong enough to survive for her children, while simultaneously ostracizing her from the other women in the community who were not willing to open their hearts and leave themselves quite as vulnerable. Often, Morrison artfully and intentionally leaves these controversial instances of claiming oneself hanging in the realm of ethical ambiguity. To reiterate, it is not the purpose of Morrison, or the reader, to decide if Sethe is to be forgiven or damned, but rather to understand how these complex traumatic motherly failures go on to produce more memories that become another source of secondary identity trauma in her life. Molly Abel Travis artfully explains: “The design of Morrison’s narrative calls for identification with Sethe, while also ultimately making that identification impossible. We feel sympathy for Sethe, but the ‘inability to fix a position on the central action complicates our relation to Sethe as the central actor’ (Phelan 329)” (Travis 236). The reader’s sympathetic feelings parallel those of Sethe’s community in the novel, but

interestingly, while there is sympathy for Sethe she still remains an ‘othered’ character both among the novel’s other women and Morrison’s readers. Travis focuses largely on the empathetic burden placed on the reader to align themselves with Sethe’s point of view—one who commits infanticide to establish herself as “an agent of resistance against slavery” (233). However, while Travis highlights the authorial ambiguity that Morrison has mastered in *Beloved*, it is vital for the reader to push past the superficial judgment of Sethe’s actions to understand the traumatic effects of othering that are a result of Sethe’s struggling attempts to love her children. Instead, the focus should be placed on Sethe’s psychological grounding for her actions: her troubled understanding of what and how the task of mothering is to be undertaken.

Just as Sethe is hypercritical of her actions, Toni Morrison is hypercritical of her own role as an African American female author. This is where the heart of the argument behind authorial intent and intentional ambiguity can be analyzed. While several of her critical comments focus on the role of the “Africanist other” (47) in canonical texts, Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, takes the analysis one step further. Morrison explains that the “Africanist other...permitted opportunities for the exploration of ethics and morality” (48). In *Beloved* however, while the racial trauma of slavery permeates the novel, Sethe is not presented as a *racial* other, but is othered because of her desire to comprehend the mother-child dynamics in her life—a struggle that many of the other women were not willing to undertake at all. Morrison takes the canonical trope of the African other and dives head first into Sethe’s ambiguous relationships as both a daughter who lost a mother, and a mother who lost a daughter, to promote understanding of the complexity of othering in a social and psychological rather than racial context. In understanding Sethe’s psychological cause and effect relationship with motherhood the reader can gain deeper insights into both her and her daughter(s). Taking this

into account Travis's analysis of the character Beloved as a "return of a repressed racial memory" (233) becomes particularly more intriguing. The memories of childless mothers and motherless children become the recurring source of trauma for Morrison's women, although Sethe is one of the few to actively attempt to work through the traumas for Denver and Beloved's sake. Memory and more importantly the *rememory*—often examples of failed acts of mothering—become important themes chasing Sethe, and the other Ohio women, throughout the novel. These memories of motherhood become the lens through which Sethe must cope with her past traumas, as well as the impending trauma of Beloved's new presence. The repression of these traumatic memories is largely undone by the arrival of Beloved on the doorstep of 124. Her presence and beguilingly childish temperament bring these repressed memories painfully back to the surface, especially for Sethe who is already struggling to navigate her supposedly 'free' life after the loss and abandonment of most of her children. It is valuable here to distinguish simple remembering from Morrison's "rememory" as the implication behind rememory is "to perform the act of reassembling its members, thus stressing the importance to the memory process of creative reconstruction. Rememory... evokes the more intuitive oral memory process" (Lock). Rememory then, more so than just remembering, becomes a way to relive—through their retelling—in order to cope with the traumatic ghosts, "the anachronic intrusion of the past into the present" (Luckhurst 93) that haunt their psyches. Rememory is an externalized approach to comprehend the "community of overlapping and interlocking, sometimes interdependent, consciousnesses" (Lock), of the shared trauma of these African American women.

As mentioned earlier, there is a duality in Sethe's character that makes it impossible to completely condemn or forgive her controversial actions. Sethe's inexperience with a mother figure during her terrifying childhood has affected her own ability to appropriately mother her

children. Sethe acted out of what she identifies as love, but clearly her inexperience with more traditional, nurturing, motherly love has given her no foundation for how to appropriately express her emotions or offer protection to her own offspring. This viciously cyclic dynamic between mother and child is what makes condemnation or forgiveness of Sethe difficult for the reader and for the community's women, many of whom experienced similar traumas related to motherly bonds. Navigating the ambiguity of motherhood is the journey that Morrison takes the reader on through Sethe's own character arc. Of her intentionally authored ambiguities, Morrison states:

These spaces, which I am filling in, and can fill in because they were planned, can conceivably be filled in with other significances. That is planned as well. The point is that into these spaces should fall the ruminations of the reader and his or her invented or recollected or misunderstood knowingness. The reader as narrator asks the questions the community asks, and both reader and "voice" stand among the crowd, within it, with privileged intimacy and contact, but without any more privileged information than the crowd has. ("Unspeakable Things" 157)

The questions present in *Beloved's* ambiguities are *not* solely questions surrounding race, despite its inherent presence in a novel about an escaped female slave, but rather about the vulnerability of motherhood and these women's subsequent inability to express motherlove. This inability is perpetuated until the climax of the novel when the female collective arrives—in many ways assuming the motherly role they previously denied or lost—to protect one of their own damaged women, Sethe, from the further damage experienced in her relationship with Beloved.

While the exact psychologically damaging effects of growing up motherless in 19th-century Kentucky slave life are outside the realm of experience for modern readers, Morrison

was able to highlight this moral ambiguity as a powerful commentary on the long term effects of childhood trauma. Despite the arguable authorial motive, the effect is the same: Sethe's explanation for her infanticide should not be read as a testimony to her innocence, but an explanation of the trauma it has caused her, as well as how she has coped with the memories of this trauma and her own traumatic childhood. Her retelling becomes a necessary means of working through the trauma. Sethe's recognition of her own memories of the barely-there relationship with her mother is emphasized with the introduction of Beloved's character. To Sethe, Beloved is the haunting reminder of her failed attempt at mothering—though the death of the beloved baby is not necessarily a regret of Sethe's. To clarify, Sethe's regret would be that she is not with her daughter either in life or death; if she had succeeded with her homicidal/suicidal intentions, there would be nothing to regret because she would have kept the family unit safely intact. Instead there is a sense of abandonment that Sethe is all too familiar with from having barely known and quickly lost her own mother. Not only does Beloved directly symbolize a second chance for Sethe to succeed at motherhood, but also serves as the catalyst for Sethe's rememories of her own psychologically damning adolescent experiences with her mother. Through the glimpses back into Sethe's psyche, Beloved grants the reader access to Sethe's first terrifying experiences within a flawed mother-daughter relationship.

Through Sethe's controversial character, set amongst a backdrop of racially equalized characters, Morrison is able to take the previously stereotypical portrayal of "Africanist others" in the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant literary canon and turn it on its head playing on the assumptions of the modern reader. Morrison explains, "That assumption is...that slave women are not mothers; they are "natally dead," with no obligations to their offspring or their own parents" (*PITD* 21). She goes on to explain, "The absence of mother love...is connected to the

assumption of a slave's natal isolation" (*PITD* 23). Many of the women in the surrounding community are quick to assume the infanticide is an act of cruelty committed because of their communal experience of vulnerability through natal isolation; having lived through such a traumatic childhood and adult life they are unable to nurture. Sethe, however, having experienced similar traumas, remains open and welcomes the vulnerability of love. Sethe seems open to the potential for love *despite* her trauma, but she is alone in her thinking and is misunderstood and ostracized in her 'free' community. She moved from being racially othered as a female slave, to being socially othered because of her psychological openness to love and motherhood. It is only through Beloved's presence that Sethe and her new community are able to remember and reevaluate their traumatic childhoods, and eventually come to rescue Sethe and force her to regain the sense of community that had been lost to them.

In one of her first examples of claiming ownership over something, in this instance retold as a memory, Sethe recalls her arrival in Ohio. Sethe "was big," she explains to Paul D, "and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between...Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love" (Morrison 190). She presents her fleeing to Ohio as an attempt to truly reclaim her own identity as a mother, and a fulfillment of her longing to "get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire" (Morrison 191). Unfortunately, while Sethe understands that this claiming ownership is the first step in deepening her motherly connection, the next steps are unfamiliar territory for her. In the bleak world of Sethe's childhood she was raised, sold, purchased, and consistently treated as property. For Sethe, finally having the freedom she desired for herself and her own most prized possessions, her children, was motive enough for her to ensure that freedom remained—by whatever means

necessary. It is vital to note that Sethe's understanding of motherhood can be better explained as an understanding of ownership.

Her adolescence was lived not through a mother-daughter relationship, but through the damaging lens of the slave-master relationship. Sethe is more familiar with how one demonstrates ownership than how one shows love. When highlighting this childhood dynamic, there is an interesting comparison that can be made between slave ownership and the 'ownership' experienced in a parental role. Both slave owner and mother may feel a sense of entitlement or responsibility to protect what is theirs. As can be seen with Sethe the means of protection, namely the act of infanticide, are not without their psychological repercussions. The reasoning behind the acts, however, is where the important difference can be noted; slave owners protect their property to protect their *own* investments, whereas in motherhood, as far as Sethe can understand it, one may sacrifice her own self and mental well-being to ensure a better life for her children—even if that better-life can only be preserved through their death. There is a *selflessness*—a *giving* of one's body—present in motherhood that stands in direct contrast to the *selfishness* of slave ownership—the *taking* of another's body. These contrasts can be more clearly understood in analyzing the sacrificial portrayal of breastfeeding in order “to draw a link between slavery and motherhood, which not only exposes how slavery in fact horrifically disrupted motherhood, but also traces how these issues of ownership and mastery, of possession and possessiveness, are always present as anxieties in the early mothering relationship” (Stone 303). Sethe's motivation to cross the river is not solely to gain freedom for herself, but more importantly to bring milk to her waiting baby. Sethe's desire to provide milk to nourish her child can be juxtaposed with the violent taking of her milk by schoolteacher's nephews; it is the difference between give and take. There is a reciprocation in the mother-child relationship, be it

one of affection or protection, that is just not present in the slave-master relationship. Note also that Sethe's intention was not to turn her beloved daughter into a martyr as a solitary sacrifice, but rather to sacrifice her whole family, as well as herself, to protect their newfound freedom. Death became a more appealing option for her than returning her children to the circumstances she worked so hard to free them—and herself—from in Kentucky where she would never truly have been able to love her children the way she deemed fit. She had terrible acts done to her and in turn committed a terrifying act, but there must be a clear distinction between opinions on the action itself and the opinion of the perpetrator of that action, or the motives behind the action, especially taking into consideration Sethe as a product of her traumatically motherless adolescent environment.

The overwhelming source of terror for Sethe throughout the novel is her inability to understand her relationship with motherhood. She is justifiably fearful of furthering the vicious cycle of failed mother-child relationships, and thus she struggles to understand, or appropriately express, her motherly instinct, as opposed to her instinct for survival, which as a slave has been a primary instinct her entire life. This terror permeates Sethe's understanding of her role as mother, causing Sethe to become a perpetrator of more terrifying acts; these dual terror sources, motherhood and memory, create a psychological dichotomy in the trauma of the novel. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (181). To be clear, the act of infanticide is not the sole source of trauma in Morrison's novel. Instead the heart of the trauma is motherly abandonment and desertion. Thus, “the infanticide is one more desertion. If Sethe is the mother who killed her daughter to protect her from being re-enslaved, she is also *the* mother

separated from *the* child in Middle Passage” (Morgenstern 114). It is the loss of connection between mother and daughter, the lack of motherlove, that haunts Sethe’s psyche. She was deserted by her mother, who was hanged during Sethe’s childhood, and she goes on to desert her own two-year-old by succeeding in her infanticide while failing to complete her intended suicide. She knows both the trauma of being deserted and the guilt of being the deserter. This is the motivation for her protective instinct upon Beloved’s arrival at 124.

Sethe’s whole life has been a perpetual onslaught of traumas, beginning with her own memory as a nursing infant being removed from the breast of her mother to be nursed instead by someone whose *job* it was to provide nourishment, sans the loving motherly bond. Keeping this motherless childhood in mind, one could easily argue that the memories that the various characters work so diligently to keep at bay, including the “baby ghost” herself, can all be characterized as “intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 181) for Sethe. Sethe is “repeat[ing] the traumatic aspects of [her] past life in relation to a current and tragic situation” (Alexandru 196). She is essentially a product of her traumatic environment, and thus her perception of trauma is heightened. She was deprived of love and treated traumatically and thus the lines between the two have been blurred causing Sethe to love ‘too hard’ once she is free from the primary trauma. Her inability to navigate her place in the mother daughter relationship then becomes a secondary source of trauma in her search for identity in her new free life in Ohio. While motherhood is at the heart of the issues of identity that permeate the novel, there are many supplementary sources of trauma that branch off and effect the formation of identities. Much like the trees remembered from Sweet Home, or even the symbolic tree-shaped scar on Sethe’s back, the motherly traumas can serve as the trunk of the tree, while the branches are intertwined traumas that have different effects on the construction of identity for the characters. For these women the traumatic branches

are intricately related, but range in severity from understanding the origin of their names, to the infanticide, and even include the simple act of leaving a place.

For Denver, leaving 124 Bluestone Road becomes a crippling source of psychological trauma, while for Sethe leaving Kentucky was full of physical traumas, including the strange circumstances of Denver's birth. 124 Bluestone Road becomes the hub of traumatic memories, though more complexly, "trauma, in this sense, is not something ensconced within, and which perpetually disturbs, the psyche, but can become transcribed onto the very walls of a lived environment: it becomes at once symptomatic and visible, unseen yet obvious" (Ng 232). The house, like *Beloved*, becomes an empty shell to be filled, haunted, cleansed, and entrapped with the phantom memories of trauma. This is what makes Sethe's eventual decision to trap herself inside with her daughters so potentially damaging. Despite the developing characterizations for 124 that begin each section— "spiteful" (Morrison 3), "loud" (Morrison 199), and eventually "quiet" (Morrison 281) —we witness Denver who refuses to step off the porch, and Sethe for whom moving is simply not an option: "No moving. No leaving. It's all right the way it is" (Morrison 17). They are inextricably tied to that house; despite the freedom they struggled so hard to achieve they now restrict themselves to the safety of the home Baby Suggs gave them. Interestingly, as hesitant as the characters are to claim ownership over their memories and their freedoms, they have a clear understanding of their respective places at 124. Ambiguity in many ways becomes its own beguiling character developing throughout the novel, however, the clear setting of these physical boundaries is an interesting authorial technique for Morrison. She explains this "intention to give the house an identity separate from the street or even the city; to name it the way "Sweet Home" was named; the way plantations were named, but not with nouns or "proper" names—with numbers instead because numbers have no adjectives... Numbers here

constitute an address, a thrilling enough prospect for slaves who had owned nothing” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 160). In her explanation, Morrison introduces the connection between naming something and claiming ownership over it, the same ownership that Sethe struggles to navigate in the mother daughter dynamic rather than the slave-master dynamic.

Interestingly, in a novel where identifying something is a way of actualizing and claiming it, a quick analysis of Baby Suggs’s name shows that there is a reversal of the maternal figure into an infant dependent, similar to the later reversal witnessed between Denver and Sethe. This theory of Baby Suggs’s dependence is strengthened when she explains—through a retold memory—the origin of her name. After being called Jenny throughout her life with the Garners, Halle buys her freedom and she is sent to Ohio. Only then does she question Mr. Garner, “Why you all call me Jenny?” (Morrison 167). When Mr. Garner asks Baby Suggs what she calls herself, she is unable to give an appropriate answer: “I don’t call myself nothing” (167). Baby Suggs’s name is a combination of the term of endearment her husband gave her and that same husband’s surname. Her name “was all she had left of the husband she claimed” (Morrison 168). The idea behind naming something as an action of claiming it highlights Baby Suggs’s own declaration that she has nothing to call herself. Naming something means investing in it, and in her cruel reality, it was radically dangerous to invest any thought into one’s own identity as a black slave mother for fear it would become a vulnerability to be exploited. This motif of naming a thing is made more complex when considering that throughout the novel the real name of Sethe’s first born—and first killed—daughter is never revealed.

Naming something, or naming oneself, is a direct way to show ownership over that thing or that self. Analyzing the origins of some of the other characters’ names gives an interesting perspective on the act of claiming a thing for oneself. The story that lies at the origin of Denver’s

name becomes another important memory retold through multiple perspectives. Although it is logically impossible for Denver to remember the first-hand account of her own birth, she has heard its details enough to claim the story as her own to retell for Beloved. Again, there is an instance of the strange woman from the water hungering to adopt the memories of the inhabitants of 124, although Beloved recounts no logical memories of her own. A name is given at birth and thus becomes the first instance of identity definition, or more appropriately, having one's identity defined for them, usually by their mother. It is similar to the scars given to Sethe and her mother, although there must be a distinction made again between the selflessness of the ownership/protection provided in motherhood and the selfishness of slave ownership. It is the first instance in life of another person constructing your identity. Having given birth to Denver in the midst of fleeing Kentucky, Sethe recalls her makeshift midwife who Denver is named after, "the white girl [with] thin little arms but good hands" (Morrison 90). The white girl who gave Sethe the valuable wisdom that "anything dead coming back to life hurts" (Morrison 42), which becomes true both of the baby-ghost returning as Beloved, and the memories that the characters are forced to relive. Here Morrison's authorial motives—similar to those present in her short story "Recitatif"—serve a much deeper purpose than just a racial commentary on othering in motherhood. In juxtaposing Amy and Sethe, Morrison is playing with the interpersonal relationship between women, be they mothers, daughters, sisters, or even the female peers waiting in Ohio. In many ways, Amy Denver is the mirrored counterpart to the pregnant Sethe. Both women were orphaned runaways who lived traumatic lives of slavery and exploitation, but while the race is an unavoidable difference it is Sethe's pregnancy that becomes the fulcrum of division between the two women. The parallels between Sethe and Amy Denver in a mother-daughter context are clear as the two women essentially save and protect each other. As her

makeshift midwife, Amy Denver adopts a motherly role to the pregnant Sethe, thus making Denver's name that of a motherly lineage—despite the racial differences. Amy Denver “sings to ease Sethe's pain” and “conflates mother-love with mother-pain... bind[s] with and heal[s] Sethe, saving her and her child from certain death” (Coonradt 175). Amy, despite her presence as one of the few white characters in the novel, can be read as a temporary replacement mother for the mother Sethe never really knew; motherhood transcends race in this example. Consequently, when considering the motherly instincts of the woman she is named after, Denver's later maturation into the motherly figure for Sethe and Beloved is read as a much more natural transition.

Unfortunately, while the miraculous story behind Denver's naming is told and retold, the identity of Sethe's first daughter who awaited her milk in Ohio is never revealed. She is referred to only by the name given to her in death and engraved in pink jewels. Her tombstone reads “Beloved”: a word chosen by Sethe and paid for with her body. The baby's death, and her lack of a name throughout the novel, parallel the other children who are the products of rape and fall victims to the rampant infanticide in the novel. This includes the other children that Sethe's mother did not keep, as well as the child that Ella, one of the neighborhood women in Ohio, chose not to nurse, or name. In the continuing cycle of trauma and false motherhood, “by refusing to nurse the baby she has delivered, Ella follows in the steps of other women who, like Sethe's mother herself, have killed all the children of the violence of white rape without even naming them, without really calling them into existence” (Scarpas 99). Ella fails to grant an identity or claim ownership over the child she bore, making the unnamed child as much a victim of its inconceivable circumstances as Ella herself.

The most complex trauma of the novel, despite the various ambiguities mentioned, is the *shared memory* of the originally traumatic events. Each character has their own perspective on the events, including the infanticide, that are shaped by their previous life experiences as orphaned children and later as abused mothers. The trauma can be considered subjective as each women's experience with losing or giving up a child is unique, but the emotions those losses bring are shared by many in a type of "collective trauma" (Burrows 130). The newly freed women in Ohio "are collectively *possessed* by the long-term insidious effects of racism: they are psychically 'owned' to a greater or lesser degree by events beyond their control" (Burrows 130). While they may have fought for and achieved their physical freedom, their shared memories of abuse and trauma still serve as a collective limiting factor to their psychological freedom. The painful, haunting reassembling of the original experience, to reference Helen Lock, serves as a second wave of trauma, an aftershock if you will, that becomes a *new* source of trauma for Morrison's complex characters, Sethe and Ella included. They struggle with the original traumatic act and are then forced to repetitiously face the memories of these acts time and again in what becomes a vicious and crippling psychological loop while trying to claim and define their identities. Beloved's sudden presence serves as a simultaneously damaging, but necessary, catalyst for the healing of these fragmented memories. She both perpetuates the painful recollection of memories while also breaking the cycle of fragmentation.

Beloved, both the baby "haint in the house" (Morrison 18) and the "fully dressed woman [who] walked out of the water" (Morrison 60), becomes a physical representation of the historical traumatic memories—both Sethe's and those of the "60 million and more" referenced in Morrison's book dedication. She is the outer reflection of the inner turmoil for the several characters with whom she interacts. We can compare Beloved to the rusted "little tobacco tin"

(Morrison 137), in which Paul D symbolically keeps his repressed memories. Beloved is an antagonist of remembrance, and in her seduction of Paul D, she causes “the flakes of rust [to fall] away from the seams of his tobacco tin” (Morrison 138). Beloved unlocks something in all of the characters she interacts with—even if they prefer *not* to remember. In a critical interpretation of Beloved’s character, Petar Ramadanovic explains, “What Sethe identifies with in the figure is...not only its self-absorption but also the wound that Beloved represents, which together testify to Sethe’s inability to let go of the trauma that defines her” (182). Beloved becomes a tangible reminder of the suppressed memories that Sethe and the other characters struggle to decide whether to deny or to claim. Clearly, her interactions with Sethe are taking advantage of the guilt that Sethe feels as a mother having killed her child. Sethe shoulders the burden as the tender mother figure even before realizing who Beloved is—or *may* represent—but by the end of the novel Beloved becomes a source of terror for Sethe. She is a reminder not only of the child Sethe killed, but of Sethe’s own childhood and lack of relationship with her mother. Through the exposure to these traumatic memories, as well as the overwhelming pressure to provide and nurture that Beloved’s presence promotes, the once strong willed Sethe becomes a weak, psychologically damaged shell of her former self, something that might be appropriately termed as a “fragmented” self.

It is often assumed by reader and critic alike that Beloved’s character is simply the phantom of the murdered daughter, or on a larger scale, “the personification of the African American motherline” (O’Reilly 89). However, in analyzing her possible other histories, as a survivor of the Middle Passage, or an abused girl held captive and sexually abused, for example, her own lack of a mother—and later descent into pregnancy—can be held in comparison with the other freed motherly women. The textual evidence to suggest a further analysis of Beloved’s

unknown origins is often ignored, but in focusing on that evidence for a moment, “a number of troubling textual details are explained: her repeated descriptions of what seems to be sexual abuse, her unlined feet, her fear of men like Paul D., her child-like vocabulary, and her emotions of abandonment, bodily fragmentation, and mental instability” (Cutter 65). She becomes another female flesh and blood character to be analyzed rather than just an intangible, misunderstood, psychological symbol. Beloved lost a mother and Sethe lost a daughter, and this is the foundation of their damaging bond—despite Sethe’s guilt and both Sethe and Denver’s own feelings that Beloved is the ghost of the murdered baby. Unfortunately, the pregnant Beloved vanishes leaving the reader only to hypothesize on her future actions as a mother. Having been mothered—despite the arguably parasitic nature of this mothering—by Sethe, in what context would Beloved go on to mother a child? This question remains yet another unanswerable ambiguity for Morrison’s readers to interpret. As the novel proceeds, the reader is exposed to these various fragments of ambiguity that need reassembling. Similar fragmentation can be seen in many of the characters’ psychological developments throughout the novel’s trauma riddled plot.

In her psychological reading of *Beloved*, Lynda Koolish references Morrison’s declaration that, “the trauma of racism is...the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis” (Koolish 174). Taking into account Morrison’s own assertion that the broken identity precedes the psychological trauma is consistent with the claim that Sethe’s understanding of terror and trauma is essentially binary. This fragmented self is simultaneously held together by memories and retold stories, and torn apart by the memories too painful to remember, thus creating more traumatic experiences. Beloved, having few, if any, discernable memories of her own, falls outside of this realm of self

fragmentation. While Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and the others have become fragmented as a result of their traumatic pasts, Beloved arrives with no memories and instead adopts the rememory fragments of the others into her own undefinable identity. Beloved becomes a necessary evil for the healing process of the now freed slaves. She inspires memory despite the pain and secondary trauma it awakens, and thus helps the characters to heal and rejoin a sense of community. In his discussion of the narcissistic tendencies of trauma Ramadanovic goes on to explain that “trauma victims tend to help others only once they are well into working through their trauma. Those they help also tend to be like themselves, such as victims of the same kind of trauma or members of the same national, racial, or gender group. Even selflessness and solidarity among survivors can hence be tied to a narcissistic compulsive repetition and a kind of acting out” (179). While working through their traumas they must individually claim themselves in order to claim themselves as part of a family/community. Furthermore, they must deal with their traumatic memories of lost mothers and strained motherhood in order to end their othering of Sethe for her inexperienced attempts to express motherlove. The resolution of Beloved’s role is of course her disappearance brought on by the damaged women—the orphaned daughters who grew to be damaged/damaging mothers—to come and save Sethe from the memory devouring phantom that Beloved has evolved into.

Through her parasitical hunger for the often painful memories of others, Beloved also becomes a manipulator of the temporal flow of the novel. Morrison is able to intentionally manipulate the novel’s timeline through the constant pattern of remembering and retelling provoked by Beloved. An analysis of the fragmented identities of the women should also include an analysis of the fragmented timeline running through the novel. In an explanation for her “in-medias-res opening”, Morrison writes:

It is abrupt, and should appear so. No native informant here. The reader is...thrown into an environment completely foreign...as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense. ("Unspeakable Things" 161)

In order to understand the othering present in the novel, the reader must be ripped from reality and brought forcefully into the novel as part of the traumatized community's collective conscious. Regarding trauma and time, William Auerbach explains that "the time continuum by which we hold our world together, the interrelatedness and the connections between a past, present, and future disintegrate, are broken in the most elementary sense, so that each instant loses its relation to any other instant and stands by itself, not embraced in a time continuum" (200). While Auerbach's discussion is largely comprised of scientific data surrounding the case study of an African American man who experiences childhood trauma at the hands of his mother, the discussion of trauma and fragmentation is useful in understanding the function of Beloved. She is lacking her own identity and thus is immune to the fragmentation. Instead, she serves as a tool for the synthesis of the other women's fragments *after* their traumatic and motherless experiences, especially in her involvement with Sethe's memories. The temporal distance between the event and the memory of the event is necessary for the women to successfully piece together their previously fragmented identities, despite how psychologically daunting of a task it might actually be.

For as much blame that many critics place on Beloved as a parasite or devourer of memories, blame could also be assigned to Sethe, who becomes symbolic of the "Devouring Mother archetype" that highlights "the dangers attendant on the woman who needs to wean

herself from mothering as her children grow up so that she can develop other parts of her identity” (Demetrakopolous). All of Sethe’s children—but especially her daughters—serve as stand in, substitute fragments of her identity. Her own identity is hard enough to claim, but if she can claim or understand her daughters as reflections of herself perhaps there is a chance that their collective life will turn away from chaos. Unfortunately, Sethe lost an opportunity to mother after killing her daughter in the shed, and thus instead of weaning herself away from the role of motherhood, she adopts the role full force and becomes the mother that the mysterious Beloved desperately desires. Sethe’s projection of her own fragmented identity onto her daughters becomes even more complex when juxtaposing her previous actions in the shed with her later actions inside 124. Rather than grow apart from Denver and her newest ‘daughter’ Beloved, Sethe locks them in the house to try and make reparations for her previous inability to keep them all together. She is trying to forcefully regroup the shattered pieces of herself because “to kill her daughter is to kill her own best self, to kill her best and self-gendered fantasy of the future. The act is like killing time itself, especially its redemptive gifts, which the daughter, as a potential mother, symbolizes” (Demetrakopolous). This potential for motherhood parallels Beloved’s own pregnancy at the novel’s end, and again leaves the reader with the unanswered questions of how Sethe’s mothering will effect the next generation of potential mothers, Denver and Beloved. Would they be able to effectively wean themselves away as their children grew, or would they follow Sethe’s lead and create a toxic, consuming environment until the codependency became too destructive of a burden?

Owning and protecting oneself is a struggle exacerbated by the lack of motherly love and protection, and thus the act of storytelling becomes the first line of psychological defense in defining one’s identity. Remembering and retelling are ways for the characters to navigate and

cope with their timelines of traumatic experiences in an attempt to claim psychological ownership of their personal history. Storytelling becomes a source for the African cultural phenomenon of *nommo* (“Unspeakable Things” 162), defined as “the magic power of the word to call things into being, to give life to things through the unity of word, water, seed, and blood” (Handley 677). To call something into existence is to name it and give it a story, to tell or retell its history. The same is true for Sethe’s (and the other female characters’) own identities. Their names are given to them, they are branded, their children and their own bodies are commoditized; it is no wonder that identifying oneself or claiming motherhood over one’s children is such a struggle. Before her decline into disjointed madness we see an instance of Sethe’s more coherent storytelling. To clarify, it is not the infanticide that signifies or even necessarily causes her madness, but rather the devotion to Beloved once the three women lock themselves inside the house. She forces them into reclusiveness in an attempt to protect her children from the outside threats and judgment of those who cannot understand their mother-daughter dynamic—the same dynamic Sethe struggles to understand herself. By quarantining them, Sethe unwittingly forces herself to cohabitate with “her psychic scars and existential bruises” (Fuston-White 463) that are uncovered in her intensifying relationship with Beloved. Before this declining spiral into madness, however, Sethe remembers for Denver and Beloved a memory of a mark that her mother had on her ribs, a brand given to her by her owner to designate her as property; this was her only distinguishable identity. Suddenly Sethe arises and begins to fold because, Morrison writes, “the folding felt too fine to stop. She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew” (73). Beloved has implored Sethe to tell a story about her own mother, and in doing so has brought another traumatic memory into the foreground of Sethe’s psyche. Sethe remembers now,

not her biological mother, but the woman who was responsible for essentially raising Sethe, a woman named Nan. Sethe, in an informative frame memory, remembers for her daughters a memory of her caregiver, Nan, retold to Sethe as her mother is hanged:

She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island.

The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man, she put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. (Morrison 74)

The physicality of both of these memories is important when remembering Sethe's own identifying scar and her later description of wanting to have arms wide enough to hold and protect all her children at once. Both her mother's branding scar, Sethe's own "chokecherry tree" scar (Morrison 93), and the scar from the saw on Beloved's neck become permanent signifiers of their identities, as well as signifiers of the trauma they experienced. The scar on Sethe's mother is used both to distinguish her as property and differentiate her from the other slaves, but is more complexly, the only identity she has; it has been created for her. There is no sense of self, but rather only a sense of identity as property, of white ownership over black identity (Durkin 544). Similarly, Sethe's scar was given as punishment but becomes a living part of her identity, as well as a constant reminder of the various traumatic pain that Sweet Home held for her. Their identity is not their own but is forcibly and painfully placed on them by their owners. These scars become symbolic of the identities constructed *for* them, and because of their permanent nature, must be dealt with and given meaning in order to reclaim one's identity. The scar on Sethe's back "carries this new code under which she is to live, the code of domination in which the definer may inscribe his definition upon the very flesh of the defined" (Fuston-White 466). Sethe must learn to own her scars in order to redefine and reclaim her identity as a free woman, and more

importantly as a free mother. Unfortunately, in order to own the scars, the traumatic memories of their infliction must be remembered, relived, and retold.

Sethe's powerful childhood memories serve as a psychological grounding for her own struggle towards motherhood. Sethe is not familiar with how to form an adequate or healthy motherly bond because she was denied that luxury. Her only understanding of a relationship similar to motherhood is one of slave ownership and chosen property. The issue of claiming a child is similar to an issue of choice: to claim a child is to actively choose to be a mother. From this arises the motif of the chosen child; Sethe was the only child her mother wanted, having been born out of love, the rest she abandoned or killed in her own acts of infanticide. Another example of the chosen child motif is the relationship between Baby Suggs and Halle. Of her eight children, Halle is the only one Baby Suggs got to know and watch mature, although technically it was more out of circumstance than by choice. Unlike Sethe, Baby Suggs did not have the luxury of being surrounded by all of her children; "Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" (Morrison 28). While Sethe was grateful to have arms big enough to hold all her children, and upon reaching Ohio, a heart finally free enough to love them all, Baby Suggs did not have the freedom for this big love, even after she is granted physical freedom, she is separated from the only son she has ever known. After her seven children fell victim to the cruel inevitabilities of slavery "[God] gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn't mean a thing" (Morrison 28). Contrastingly, Baby Suggs did not actively commit infanticide, but having borne eight children into a life of slavery, could have guessed their unfortunate fates were essentially sealed in death, although knowing did not make their removal any less traumatic. How psychologically damaging it must be to struggle to create

life only to be told by the cruel circumstances that that life belongs to someone else because neither mother nor child have any more value than cattle. This is the heart of the issue of ‘othering’ in *Beloved*. If the inherent issue of race were not present in the plot the dilemma the reader is faced with is an ethical animal all its own. Sethe is not condemned because she is a black slave woman who murdered her child, but rather she is condemned and ostracized by her African American community because she chose to try and love *all* of her children. During a time that a child was not a blessing but a cursed innocent born into a system of exploitation and suffering, to desire such deep emotional attachment(s) was to leave yourself vulnerable to inevitable pain and future trauma. Sethe—having witnessed the man she loved accept the vulnerability and have so much love for his mother—lacked a clear understanding of the role of mothers and children.

Thankfully, Halle was able to provide freedom for his mother, despite her lack of children to share it with. Unlike Halle and Baby Suggs however, Sethe’s mother did not get to spend a life with her child. Baby Suggs watched Halle grow; “Twenty years. A lifetime” (Morrison 28), while Sethe’s mother was hanged when she was still a child under Nan’s care. Sethe’s own lack of relationship with her mother serves as a foundational motive for her protection through infanticide. Sethe explains, “I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left” (Morrison 236). She was not nursed by her mother, but instead by another slave whose job it was to provide the nourishment to the many nursing children and she will be damned if she has to watch her children be taken from the safety of her arms and forced to endure even half the trauma that she has. The idea of providing milk as an important responsibility of a mother is evident several times throughout the novel.

Milk becomes an important symbol of life and an indicator of motherhood as it is “the essence of motherlove” (O’Reilly 129). The first instance is in Sethe’s emotional recounting of Schoolteacher’s boys taking her milk, an act of “appropriation and commodification of slave women’s motherlove” (O’Reilly 129). Sethe remembers, “All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me... I told them to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got here in a few days she wouldn’t have forgot me. The milk would be there and I would be there with it” (Morrison 19). For Sethe, who was not nursed by her own mother, providing nourishment for her children becomes one of the driving forces behind her escape. It is an obligation she must fulfill for her daughter in order to prove herself as a mother, and more importantly, to ensure that her child does not forget her. Sethe is validated as a mother by her children’s dependence on her. Interestingly, there is a correlation between the substitution of sugar water in the cloth to temporarily nurse the unnamed baby, with the constant cravings Beloved has for sweet things when she arrives at 124 Bluestone Road. Again, milk’s importance is witnessed as Sethe nurses Denver immediately following the incident in the shed. Sethe is covered in the blood of the infant, but regardless, “Denver took her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister” (Morrison 179). In this instance there is a complex juxtaposition of life and death. The milk provides Denver with nourishment and life, while the blood of her slaughtered sister is a clear indicator of death. This duality can also be attributed to Sethe, who has the strength and ability to both create and nourish life, or to quickly end it if necessary, becoming the epitome of the complex Devouring Mother archetype discussed above. Denver believes that this mingling of milk and blood is what protects her from the wrath of the “baby ghost”, explaining: “It wouldn’t harm me because I tasted its blood when Ma’am nursed me...She’s mine, Beloved. She’s mine” (Morrison 247). Denver is able to claim ownership of

Beloved because the baby's blood became a part of her when she nursed from her mother's bloody breast. Denver, like Sethe, has adopted Beloved into her identity, and upon her arrival cares for her like the mother of an ill child. Perhaps, upon extrapolation of the novel, Denver would go on to be an adequate mother despite Sethe's struggle to lead by example in motherhood. Denver proves herself as the strongest in the house, and could arguably go on to survive her childhood trauma as a replacement child, rather than let it define her.

Although Beloved was the only child Sethe had the chance to kill in the shed, she is in many ways the chosen child. Despite her death, Sethe seems to cherish the ghost in the house, and later the stranger that arrives, almost as much, if not more, than her physically present daughter, Denver. Stemming from a source of guilt, the effects this exclusion has on Denver are loneliness and distrust of the external world, as well as the "traumatic deaf-mutism" (Luckhurst 95) that results from her classmates' inquiry into her mother's guilt. Thankfully, while Beloved's presence has a negative effect on Sethe's psyche, the opposite is true for Denver: she becomes confident enough to finally step off the porch of 124. In a complex role reversal Denver, despite "growing up in the shadow of the dead" (Kogan 127), assumes the role as the family's provider, the true matriarch, while Sethe and Beloved become her invalid dependents. Beloved's presence has driven Sethe into a tumultuous state, and where once Denver feared for both her and Beloved's safety *from* her mother, she now fears for her mother's safety from the traumatic ghostly memories that Beloved inspires and embodies. Originally, both Sethe and Denver felt a sense of ownership over Beloved. Sethe felt obligated to protect Beloved from the outside world, evident when she "locked the door, [and] the women inside were free at last to be what they liked" (Morrison 235). Again, the reader is faced with the complex juxtaposition of freedom and voluntary confinement. Denver on the other hand felt obligated to protect Beloved from her

dangerous mother, although eventually she realizes her fears were misplaced. Thus, Denver assumes the motherly role and finally leaves the once safe but now tumultuous home to ensure her mother's survival. The blurring of the boundaries between the adult/child dynamic becomes an important characteristic also evident in the relationship between Halle and Baby Suggs. Halle and Denver both work to protect and create a higher quality of life for their mothers, working for their mothers' freedom from their respective traumas.

In an interesting case study on the psychological role of the children of Holocaust survivors Ilany Kogan presents the idea of the "replacement child" (122) which can be applied to a character analysis of Denver. Although she is not born *after* the traumatic infanticide and thus is not *exactly* a replacement, Denver remains the only surviving daughter left to coexist with Sethe at 124. She serves as both a replacement and constant reminder for how life would have been had her sister not been murdered. Essentially, Kogan finds that the experience of trauma causes the parent to lose identity and thus project their desired identity onto the replacement child (132)—in the case of Morrison, there is an argument for both *Beloved* representing the replacement child for the murdered baby, as well as Denver as the replacement child for her murdered sister. Denver, however, also assumes the role of replacement mother, first for the weak, incontinent *Beloved* upon her arrival, and later for her own mother who has spiraled into an unhealthy codependence with the visiting mystery woman from the water.

Halle assumes a similar replacement role for his siblings as he is the only child that Baby Suggs let herself form a motherly bond with. As discussed above, Halle was the only child—of her eight—that Baby Suggs ever really knew. Despite Halle being the child in the relationship, the extra work he does eventually provides Baby Suggs with her freedom. A comparison can be made between Sethe, whose attempt at freeing her children in the shed were nothing less than

misguided, and Halle, who works to buy freedom for his limping mother. The goals of both Sethe and Halle are to provide freedom for their loved ones, but the means of achieving this freedom are vastly different, correlating to the different upbringings that Sethe and Halle experienced. Sethe grew up motherless and thus struggles to appropriately mother her own children later in life. Contrastingly, Halle's mother is very present in his life, which leads him to be an effective caretaker when the roles are reversed with Baby Suggs' declining age.

Sethe's name, Lynda Koolish points out, "alludes to the Biblical Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, the "appointed" or "granted" or "substituted" son who replaces the murdered Abel, replaces the lost, the dispossessed, the murdered others who died during slavery, Middle Passage, and beyond" (178). Sethe can be examined as another example of Kogan's replacement child motif that applied to Denver and Halle. Unfortunately, the difference between the three examples is the absence of Sethe's mother from the equation. For as much as Sethe desires to try her heart at motherhood, there is a part of her that desires to be mothered, as she was deprived that relationship after the traumatic death of her own mother. If Beloved is an externalized fragment of Sethe's identity, it is logical that Sethe-as Beloved- desires to be mothered as much as Sethe-as herself- desires to mother. In other words, "Sethe is both mother and daughter: she occupies that "double position" of mother-daughter...Sethe's maternal identity is inseparable from her identity as daughter" (O'Reilly 87). Somehow there is room for both of Sethe's 'selves' to play the roles in the mother-daughter relationship that they were deprived.

Motherhood then, the act of providing, sustaining, and protecting the lives of one's children, is a struggle for many of the women in *Beloved* because it requires the naming and claiming of another external thing by women who grew up unable to define even their own identities. Dealing with the recurring traumatic memories and trying to keep *oneself* sanely intact

is enough of a burden for Morrison's freed women; the thought of investing emotion in something external was an unwelcome danger in their 19th-century slave lives. There is a fine line between the "too thick" (Morrison 193) love that Sethe feels for her children, and the lack of connection between Ella and her child, or Sethe's mother and her other children, for example. Because Sethe is willing to externally invest her love in the lives of her children she is othered among her community of women who survived their childhoods as unloved orphans, and who struggle with their inability to take on the role of motherhood. Sethe is faulted for her differing opinions on "maternal nurturance" which is "situated as a political act that seeks to defy two different, although intersecting ideologies: the first deems black children as nonsubjects and the second defines slave mothers as breeders and so not mothers" (O'Reilly 127). Sethe rejects these ideologies and chooses instead to navigate the tumultuous path of motherhood, despite her inexperience with her own mother. Sethe has had four children, born out of love, that she hopes to nurture, raise, and protect. Her peers cannot comprehend these hopes for not just the survival, but the happiness of her children, thus Sethe is othered for her "too thick" attempts at motherlove.

Love, although not specifically motherly, becomes even more deeply associated with identity in the intimate scene between Paul D and Beloved who makes the, "spooky claim that she should be loved by Paul D, touched 'on the inside part' and called by her name – the mark of recognition of identity, as slaves could neither love nor be loved" (Alexandru 193). Alexandru reiterates here the value of a name in the validation of identity, a validation that Beloved hungers for from the inhabitants of 124. She desires the physical connection with Paul D that her naïve mind mistakes for love. Beloved's wish for Paul D to call her by name also speaks to the intimate connection that one experiences in naming a thing, in claiming ownership over it, as a

mother does with their child. Consequently, Beloved's desire to be touched and named leaves her pregnant at the novel's climax. She is named and becomes a potential mother to go on and continue the cycle of naming and motherlove, although how effectively this love will be expressed can only be theorized. Paul D becomes the catalyst for Beloved's graduation from childish daughter figure to Sethe, into her own mother figure for the new life growing inside her. Intriguingly, upon the disappearance of Beloved and Sethe's decline into bed ridden madness, it is Paul D who assumes the motherly role as the catalyst for Sethe's recovery. He reminds her, "You your best thing, Sethe" (Morrison 322). Now that her children have left the safe boundaries she had tried to create at 124, Sethe is left alone to analyze and understand her future identity as more than just a mother.

Perhaps Sethe is the only one of the women who lets herself feel the motherly love because she alone has achieved the freedom necessary for a love that big. Alexandru explains that when "placed in an environment of freedom, love is identified as power. Yet, when the conditions of freedom are not entirely fulfilled, love can also be the basis of great vulnerability" (195). This is the dangerous balance that the women of *Beloved* struggle to navigate in their roles as mothers. Unfortunately for many of the *Beloved* women, the power of love is too intimidating and becomes a traumatically unachievable emotion, a source of pain that is simultaneously traumatic and "cherished by the characters, to a point where the pain is more important than the love" (Alexandru 195). Sethe is one of few willing to accept the vulnerability to the pains of motherly love, and though she has fought to reach freedom and safety in Ohio, would rather trap herself in her house to marinate in the love. It is only through Beloved's mysterious presence and complex symbolism as both a psychological manipulator and another potential victim of abuse against women that the community of women in Morrison's novel are able to remember, re-

experience, and retell their traumas in an attempt to externally cope with their pain and understand love. Through their parallel experiences there is the reformation and reparation of both their individual identities and their identities within the collective community.

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