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Return to the [M]Other to Heal the Self

Identity, Selfhood and Community in Toni Morrison's Beloved

Something of the spirit of our slave forebears must be pursued today. From the inner depths of our being we must sing with them: "Before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free." This spirit, this drive, this rugged sense of somebodyness is the first and vital step that the Negro must take in dealing with this dilemma.... it will be necessary for the Negro to find a new self-image.

—Martin Luther King Jr. (1967)

The imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life and of the first bodily encounter with the mother...where are we to find them? In what darkness, what madness, have they been abandoned?

—Luce Irigaray (1991a)

In this article I will borrow from psychoanalytic theory in order to examine issues of identity formation, selfhood and community in Toni Morrison's (1998) novel *Beloved*. While the problematic cultural and sexual biases inherent in traditional psychoanalysis have been pointed out by many critics, there are aspects of psychoanalytic theory that I feel still remain valuable for literary analysis.¹ Because of the apparently universal, "biological" fact of being born of a woman, the primacy of the mother-infant connection is particularly important; for each and every one of us, our early experiences create templates for later relationships. As in much of Morrison's work—where "Mother-love" in the context of racism and slavery can be seen as an act of "resistance"—the children in *Beloved* are able to "move from mother-love to self-love to selfhood" (O'Reilly, 1999: 189).

While I will begin by briefly outlining the main tenets of psychoanalytic

theory as they relate to my reading of the novel, the bulk of this paper will illustrate how the relationship between Sethe and her two daughters, Beloved and Denver, suggest that re-experiencing the primal mother-infant relationship represents more than just an individual healing journey towards selfhood; a symbolic “return” to the “mother” can also facilitate eventual healing for the collective self of the African Diaspora, a community whose history has been fragmented by the horrifying legacy of slavery and racism.

While various aspects of Freudian theory have become popular in twentieth-century Western culture, what is known as the Oedipus complex is perhaps the most prominent. Briefly, Freud (1961) postulated that because of the extended length of human dependence in childhood, and because mothers are most often the primary caregivers of infants, small children come to desire the mother as a sexual object. Echoing the classical myth from which the theory derives its name, this desire is accompanied by a wish to get rid of the father in order to gain total possession of the mother. For boys, fear of castration by the father as punishment for this mother-love and father-hatred eventually represses the Oedipus complex. For little girls, however, the process is somewhat more complex; while a boy need only transfer his desire from his mother to women in general, a girl must go one step further and develop an attachment to men. “Penis envy” is the equivalent of the castration complex for girls. Because she holds her mother directly responsible for her “lack” of a penis, the girl eventually turns against her first love object. Like the daughter of Agamemnon in Classical Greek mythology, she then turns toward her father—and, by extension, men in general—in what is known as the Electra complex, believing that her lack of a penis can be compensated by him with a “penis baby.” For both sexes, it is this “loss” of the mother that leads to the formation of the super-ego, or unconscious. The super-ego, in turn, is what allows individuals to function socially within a culture.

Drawing on Saussure’s work in linguistics, Jacques Lacan (1985) reformulates this Oedipal conflict, replacing Freud’s literal father with the symbolic “Law” of the father. In the linguistic order, identity formation is dependent upon the individual’s initiation from the “Imaginary” pre-verbal realm of the mother into the “Symbolic” world of language and culture. During the pre-Oedipal period, a child is unable to distinguish between itself and other objects, living in an “undifferentiated and symbiotic relationship with the mother’s body so that it never knows who is who, or who is dependant on whom” (Minsky 144). During what Lacan calls the “mirror stage” of psychological development, the individual begins to develop a sense of separate identity. However, a baby’s own sense of identity is always based upon an image of itself that is reflected back to it through the gaze of someone else, that is (in most cases), the mother.

According to Lacan (1985), because initiation into the Symbolic realm functions as a kind of castration in the child’s Imaginary, the individual experiences this as loss. Throughout his/her life, an individual therefore

constantly seeks to re-experience the fluid, blissful, sensation of oneness in the pre-verbal union with the mother. Thus the concept of “desire” itself can be seen as the result of an unconscious yearning to return to the Imaginary realm of the mother/infant duo.

In *Beloved* (Morrison, 1998), a pre-verbal, still nursing, “crawling already?” baby girl is prematurely separated from her mother when, along with her older siblings, she is sent away in order to escape slavery. Her mother, Sethe, is eventually able to catch up to her children, with a brand new baby in tow. After a brief interval of freedom, during which she blissfully nurses both her baby girls, Sethe is forced to make a decision. Faced with the prospect of returning to a life of slavery with her children, the bond between the girl and her mother is once again severed during a botched attempt at murder-suicide. Because this final “severance” occurs before she is ready to enter into the Symbolic realm of language—she is “too little to talk much even” (4)—the baby girl becomes trapped forever in the pre-Oedipal stage and experiences an exaggerated desire for her mother that cannot possibly be fulfilled. *Beloved*’s insistent corporeal return can thus be seen as a very literal illustration of the symbolic function of desire.

The nature of a baby’s love for the mother—primarily in relation to the breast and mother’s milk—is insatiable. While it is possible for her to satisfy the baby’s needs, a mother can never fully satisfy the baby’s desire. Furthermore, the baby longs to be the sole object of the mother’s desire and to “isolate” her mother “from all other calls on her potential to satisfy” (Minsky, 1996: 146). In Morrison’s novel, even though Sethe herself feels that she has “milk enough for all” (1998: 100), *Beloved* is clearly disturbed by rival “calls” on her mother’s attention. Indeed, she is angry and resentful whenever Sethe does or thinks “anything that excluded herself” (1998: 100). Although the baby ghost is largely successful in driving her siblings away, in true Oedipal fashion *Beloved*’s main rival for Sethe’s attention is Paul D. It is the arrival of Paul D. as phallic signifier that urgently prompts the ghost to take physical shape. *Beloved* sets out to remove her Oedipal rival from the equation and thus gain full and undivided access to her mother.

While the project of repairing the self by a return to the mother is viewed as positive, the possibly negative consequences of failing to (re)separate from her are illustrated in this novel. Psychoanalytically speaking, one of the “dangers” inherent in the pre-Oedipal relationship is that a “part of our unconscious identity is projected onto someone else in the external world which makes us very vulnerable if that person rejects us” (Minsky, 1996: 39). *Beloved* herself, in the typically narcissistic fashion of an infant, feels unjustly rejected by her mother: “She left me behind. By myself” (Morrison, 1998: 75). This feeling of utter abandonment later translates into the resentment and hostility that she exhibits toward Sethe. Again, Freudian theory postulates that the oldest reproach against the mother is that she gave the child “too little milk,” which is construed as a “lack of love” (Minsky, 1996: 223). Because *Beloved*—

whose breath is “sweet” like that of a breast fed baby— is forced to share “her” milk with both her new-born sister and “Schoolteacher’s” sons, she returns to satisfy her desire: “Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire” (Morrison, 1998: 240).

Commenting on French feminist Luce Irigaray’s conception of psychoanalysis, Whitford (1991) points out that another “danger” in the symbiotic mother-daughter relationship, as perceived by psychoanalytic theory, is that the daughter will “eat the mother alive” using her “insides, her body, her mucous, her membranes, to form her own outer, protective skin; in the process, the mother, devoured and sacrificed, disappears” (74). Arguably, in the latter part of this novel, Beloved appears to be eating her mother alive: “Stooping to shake the damper, or snapping sticks for kindlin, Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes” (Morrison, 1998: 57). In her insatiable infantile desire, Beloved almost succeeds in totally consuming her mother by the end of the novel: “Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child... The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became.... Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (1998: 250).

Freudian psychoanalysis places great emphasis on “penis envy” as experienced by the little girl, and suggests that only having a baby of her own can ease her “unconscious sense of lack and injustice” (Minsky, 1996: 55). Feminist theorists have suggested that, far from stemming from penis envy, it is the fact of a girl’s primary homosexuality (the desire for total possession of the mother) that causes her to want to have children.² As another prominent French feminist, Julia Kristeva, points out: “a girl will never be able to re-establish” pre-Oedipal “contact with her mother—a contact which the boy may possibly rediscover through his relationship with the opposite sex—except by becoming a mother herself” (1986b: 204). Perhaps this helps to explain why Beloved herself appears to have “taken the shape of a pregnant woman” (Morrison, 1998: 261) by the end of the novel. The “redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech” of pregnant embodiment is the kind of “libidinal fusion” (Kristeva, 1986b: 206) that Beloved herself constantly desires. More than a temporary healing return to the mother in order to feed a developing selfhood, Beloved’s desire to permanently remain in the Imaginary is both dangerous and impossible.

Just as the once nourishing womb becomes potentially tomb-like for the fetus who is not expelled at term, if the “over-intimate bond with the primal womb” is not eventually severed “there might be the danger of fusion, of death, of the sleep of death” (Irigaray, 1991a: 39). At some point, on an individual level, one must eventually “reject” the mother because a symbiotic relationship with her threatens the existence of the self.³ As is evident in the symbols and myths of many cultures, including western culture, the possibility of losing oneself in one’s mother betrays itself in a “fear of the dark, of the non-

identifiable, a fear of a primal murder” (Irigaray, 1991a: 42). Denver has clearly developed a fear of the castrating and castrated mother: “She cut my head off every night” (Morrison, 1998: 206). “Watch out for her” Denver warns, “She can give you dreams” (1998: 216). Understandably, this fear of the “dark” and “primal murder” take on quite literal significance in the darkness of the wood shed.⁴

Interestingly, the symbolic role of the father also appears in Denver’s dreams where she feels that her “daddy”—the “angel man” (Morrison, 1998: 209)—will save her from her mother: “I spent all of my outside self loving Ma’am so she wouldn’t kill me, loving her even when she braided my head at night. I never let her know my daddy was coming for me” (207). Sethe—the “monstrous and unmanageable” (1998: 103) mother— is excluded from Denver’s fantasies about her father: “We should all be together. Me, him and Beloved” (209). Similarly, Beloved herself exhibits the fear, however mixed with desire, of her devouring monster/mother; in the dark place, Sethe “chews and swallows” (1998: 216) her.

On an individual level, psychoanalysis suggests that the unnatural extension of the pre-Oedipal relationship cannot lead to anything but psychosis. Viewed on a larger scale, however, it is clear that to deny an individual entry into the symbolic world of language and culture is to deny the healing potential of a communal memory. More specifically, in the context of the African Diaspora, Morrison’s (1998) novel illustrates how becoming preoccupied with individual traumatic experiences can prevent the Afro-American community from working through the collective historical trauma of slavery and the Diaspora itself. While a temporary return to the “mother”—through the recovery of memory and recognition of ancestors—is a crucial first step in the development of an unfractured “selfhood,” in order to function as an individual within a community it is necessary to (re)separate that “self” from her.

Perhaps as a positive symbol of hope, Morrison’s (1998) novel follows Denver’s gradual movement from the symbiotic mother-child relationship, through individuation and finally into the world of language, culture and community. At the beginning of the novel, even though Denver has “far too womanly breasts” (1998: 14), she is still “pushing out the front” of her mother’s dress (1998: 11). Denver oscillates between longing to participate in the community and being too afraid to step out of the safety of the home. Unlike Beloved, who is prematurely deprived of Sethe’s care, Denver has been (s)mothered. Realizing that Sethe is willing to prolong the pre-Oedipal relationship with her daughter indefinitely, Denver finally makes an attempt to sever her own ties. Her initial attempt to enter the Symbolic world of Lady Jones’ “school” is unsuccessful, and the damage that is inflicted upon her through language leaves her unable to communicate at all in the outside world. She calls this time of retreat “the original hunger—the time when, after a year of the wonderful little *i*, sentences rolling out like pie dough and the company of other children, there was no sound coming through” (1998: 121). Denver’s

social ambivalence resurfaces in her initial mistrust of Paul D., even though it is thanks to him that she appears to be well on her way to a successful (re)initiation into the community on the day of the fair: Paul D. “made the stares of other Negroes kind, gentle, something Denver did not remember seeing in their faces” (1998: 48).

However, this attempt at individuation is also destined to fail with the apparition of her sister Beloved, as all three women are eventually sent spinning back into an enclosed, pre-linguistic space. At this point in the novel, Sethe herself is more than prepared to permanently renounce any kind of community life: “Paul D. convinced me there was a world out there and that I could live in it. Should have known better. Did know better. Whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me. The world is in this room. This here’s all I need and all there needs to be” (Morrison, 1998: 183). The three female figures skating on the frozen pond can be seen as a perverted mirror image of the three hand-holding shadows on the way to the fair. In stark contrast to the sunlight and warmth on the way to the fair, where both Denver and her mother are initiated into community “life” (1998: 47) with the help of Paul D, in the “cold and dying light” (1998: 174) of the frozen pond, mother and daughters are locked in static fusion.⁵

By the end of the novel, Denver is finally able to step out of the safety of the yard and risk being “swallowed up in the world beyond the edge of the porch” (Morrison, 1998: 243). With this final decision, Denver makes her way back to Lady Jones and is finally “inaugurated” into the world “as a woman” (1998: 248). Denver physically moves away from 124 Bluestone Road and the symbolic maternal ties loosen: “As Denver’s outside life improved, her home life deteriorated” (1998: 251). Finally, as she develops a selfhood of her own, the “space” that her mother used to occupy is now open for heterosexual desire:

It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve. And it might not have occurred to her if she hadn’t met Nelson Lord leaving his grandmother’s house as Denver entered it to pay a small thank you for half a pie. All he did was smile and say, “take care of yourself, Denver,” but she heard it as though it were what language was made for. The last time he spoke to her his words blocked up her ears. Now they opened her mind. (Morrison, 1998: 253)

Fully inaugurated into the Symbolic world of community, Denver is now free to know what language is “made for.”⁶

As Karin Badt suggests, the “incessant literary return to the mother” seen in much of Toni Morrison’s work can be read both on an individual level as “an expression of a psychological desire to recover the repressed,” and on a communal level as the “expression of a political desire to recover the past” (1995: 567). Clearly, there are strong connections to be made between individual and collective healing in *Beloved*. The importance placed on recovering memory—

of “rememory”—in this novel cannot be understated. For example, the terrifying reality of the Middle Passage is communicated through Beloved’s memory. Allegorically, the liminal existence of the baby ghost represents the Middle Passage itself, and the unimaginable horror that every slave, adult and child, who was prematurely pried away from his/her mother’s body (not to mention mother Africa) must have experienced. On a much larger scale, Beloved’s individual return to the mother in order to repair the self should therefore be further understood as a “political project to repair the black mother” (Badt, 1995: 568).

The African Diaspora into the Western hemisphere has resulted in the reproduction of a “Diaspora consciousness,” in which “identity is focused less on the equalizing, proto-democratic force of common territory and more on the social dynamics of remembrance and commemoration defined by a strong sense of the dangers involved in forgetting the location of origin and the process of dispersal” (Woodward, 1997: 318). As Badt points out, in Morrison’s work “the lost memory of the mother’s body is similar to other metaphors of a buried past or a lost history that contributes to the rhetoric of oppressed people” (1995: 567). This is clearly the case with *Beloved*.

However, while a return to the mother—“to the roots of African culture” (Badt, 1995: 577)—is the first step in the cultural healing process and de-fragmenting of the self on both a personal and communal level, the fate of Beloved herself makes it clear that this return to the mother must only be temporary. Although a connection to ancestors and memory is important for maintaining the “motherline” (O’Reilly, 1999: 188) of Afro-American culture, the sense of “somebodyness” and the “new self-image” (King Jr., 1967: 124) that Martin Luther King Jr. speaks of, is contingent upon independent identity.⁷ Like Denver, who is destined to move away from her mother and take her own place within the community, the cultures of the African Diaspora are clearly distinct from their “mother” African culture, lending truth to the idea that one is “reborn from maternal severance” (Badt, 1995 577).

¹The problematic aspects of using psychoanalytic theory to analyse a book by an African American woman should be addressed here. Not unlike other Western knowledge systems, although most often masquerading as dispassionate “science,” psychoanalysis itself is merely another discourse that has been shaped by the specific cultural and historical contexts within which it is produced and which, in turn, helps to shape culture and history. Psychoanalysis has therefore been criticized as “ethnocentric” by those who question the “usefulness of applying a method developed in one culture to the study of another” (Cornell, 1993: 170). In particular, western feminist psychoanalysis has been “forcefully critiqued for its attempt to universalize the experience of white middle-class women as if that experience could tell us something about women per se” (189). As a white, middle-class woman myself, I feel that I

should at least be sensitive to my own ethnocentrism in my reliance on psychoanalysis to look at Morrison's (1998) novel.

²As Irigaray points out: "Given that the first body they have any dealings with is a woman's body, that the first love they share is mother love, it is important to remember that women always stand in an archaic and primal relationship with what is known as homosexuality" (1991a: 44). In this case, it would seem more likely for a little girl to demonstrate desire toward their mother or other women, even though "the father sees this purely as something which has been staged for his benefit . . . as the belief that a woman's desire can only be addressed to him" (101). Interestingly, Paul D. does not even entertain the notion that Beloved's "shine" could be directed at her mother: "But if her shining was not for him, who then? He had never known a woman who lit up for nobody in particular" (Morrison, 1998: 65).

³Of course, feminists challenging the hegemony of western phallogocentrism have challenged the necessity of this "rejection." Because the formation of individual consciousness is based on alienation, the "Other" becomes perceived as dangerous to the "Self" and is therefore rejected:

Psychoanalytic theory and practice suggest that political and personal violence frequently springs from unconscious anxieties and desires which may nevertheless masquerade as the language of consciousness and reason. It suggests that if we want to understand the subordination of women (and other groups on the basis of class, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity), we need to attend to the unconscious formations (such as projection) behind these responses to difference. (Minsky, 1996: 18)

Kristeva's notion of the "abject" further explains how certain groups function as "cultural scapegoats" (1986a: 182). Abjection originates when, following the baby's pre-Oedipal experience of oneness with its mother and her bodily products, the mother is symbolically castrated and denigrated. This explains why many of us are "unconsciously tempted to denigrate, attack or even destroy" the "bad" aspects of ourselves which we embody in "others perceived as different" (Minsky, 1996: 191) in order to retain our self-hood. In this way, the subjugation of the cultural "Other" (not to mention the female "Other") can also be directly linked to the repression of the Mother.

⁴More than a Medea-like attempt at female resistance in a male-dominated world, Sethe's murderous decision in the shed can also be read as subversive attempt to prevent the disruption of the pre-Oedipal bond: "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison, 1998: 164). Representing the "Law" of the father—and bolstered by the "law" of the Fugitive Bill—"Schoolteacher" arrives and threatens to disrupt the "twenty-eight days" of blissful unity mother and children have experienced. Rather than accept this disruption and become an accomplice in her children's progression into the Symbolic order, Sethe fully

intends to take both herself and her babies “over there” (163)—permanently. The woodshed itself is a dark, enclosed, protected, womb-like space. For those who exist in the light outside, the “light” of reason and language—like the sheriff who is desperate to “stand in the sunlight outside of that place” (151)—this darkness represents something unspeakable.

⁵Again, here it is important to note the problematic limitations of psychoanalytic theory. Many feminist critics have pointed out how the masculine Symbolic order of language (and “culture” itself) is based on the exclusion of the feminine, which is also seen as the bodily or the unconscious. Feminist proponents of a distinctly “feminine” way of writing propose that tapping into “unconscious desire” frees the text from “patriarchal control through the use of a specifically poetic language” (Minsky, 1996: 179). It could be argued that Morrison herself adopts such poetic strategies in this novel. For example, in the chorus of female voices, Morrison evokes particularly poetically the pre-Oedipal space, when the voices of Sethe, Beloved and Denver intermingle in three-part harmony and eventually fuse as one: “Your face is mine... Will we smile at me ... You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?” (Morrison, 1998: 215-216). As Paul D. points out, Sethe herself did not “know where the world stopped and she began” (165). Far from a frightening image of madness, the community of women at 124 Bluestone Rd. can therefore be read as a subversive, even utopian, vision of culture beyond the phallus. Indeed, the “unspeakable thoughts” of this circle of women are completely “undecipherable” to male outsiders (199).

⁶To a certain extent, the inevitability of Denver’s initiation into the (heterosexual) community is foreshadowed by her relationship to other phallic signifiers in the novel. For example, in addition to her “thrilled eyes and smacking lips” (Morrison, 1998: 136) when Stamp Paid introduces her to her first taste of non-maternal nourishment, he also prevents Sethe from sending Denver “over there” with her sister Beloved. Many references are also made to Denver’s physical likeness to her own father, Halle. Paul D. immediately recognizes that she has got “her daddy’s sweet face” (13), but it is not until the end of the novel that he realizes that, “thinner, steady in the eye, she looked more like Halle than ever” (267). When Denver decides to go out into the community, the promise of this fatherly likeness is truly fulfilled: “Her father’s daughter after all, Denver decided to do the necessary” (252).

⁷In this novel it is “Baby Suggs, holy” who offers up this message of “sombodiness” and self-love to her community while preaching in the clearing.

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